

A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Art

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A COMPANION TO
**ANCIENT NEAR
EASTERN ART**

EDITED BY
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Preface

A Companion to Ancient Near Eastern Art seeks to present to an intended readership of students, specialists, and general readers worldwide a broad view of the history and current state of scholarship on its subject. Rather than an overview of monuments and forms of expression considered characteristic of different regions and periods, this volume seeks to offer an appreciation of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology not available in surveys or other synthetic treatments. It aims to examine and represent the field from a variety of critical perspectives: across approaches and interpretive frameworks, materials and genres, key explanatory concepts, and zones of interaction. As a reference work it addresses both traditional and emerging categories of material and process, intellectual perspectives, and research priorities. It appreciates established approaches and the fluidity of boundaries between “art history” and “archaeology,” yet also acknowledges and anticipates new directions stimulated by anthropology, gender studies, visual culture, and reception theory. Finally, and importantly, it joins, and was planned in association with, a series of companions devoted to well-established fields of ancient art—Greek, Roman, and Egyptian—that was already underway at the time of its inception. Despite the diverse character of each of these cultural spheres and thus also their histories and research priorities, the series offered the opportunity to present readers with a broad understanding of each field: its principal categories of material remains, geographical and chronological parameters, and dominant approaches, methodologies, and issues.

Contributions to this *Companion* treat themes and topics as the relevant material and author expertise warrant, allowing both for “close reading” of individual monuments and more general discussion. Given the series’ format, which allows for comparatively few illustrations, I encouraged authors to contemplate those ways in which their topic has been defined and approached, and how it might develop in future investigations. I also envisaged a field-specific resource comparable to Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff’s *Critical Terms for Art History* (2nd ed., University of Chicago Press 2003), incorporating explicit discussion of methodology typically neglected in handbooks and exhibition catalogues, and including a rich bibliography. I very much hope that this volume will serve not only as a useful reference and state-of-the-field assessment, but also stimulate new directions in research and further historiographic reflection.

This volume also aims to complement *A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), which was already in press when I began to conceive this book. The *Companion* edited by D. T. Potts provides

an excellent and up-to-date introduction to geography and environment, the history of archaeological exploration, and treatment of technologies such as ceramics, glass, metallurgy, and textiles. Since it also furnishes extensive coverage of prehistoric periods, and extends its chronological scope to the advent of Islam, I sought to coordinate with rather than duplicate that volume's broad coverage. This coordination extended, with few exceptions, to matters of style and spelling of proper names.

I begin this volume by deconstructing its title: what do we mean by “ancient Near East” and “art,” and why do these terms require detailed consideration? **Part I** aims to think across regional or chronological divisions to consider the methodologies and approaches that the field has drawn on and refined. These topics embrace traditional art historical perspectives—investigation of style, meaning, and connoisseurship, for example—that have played an important role in shaping research priorities, along with more recently developed technical and scientific perspectives. It further considers how new theoretical approaches initiated in other disciplines have been applied to the study of the ancient Near East. What has been their impact to date, and how might they shape future investigations?

Part II addresses terms and concepts critical to understanding the subjects and formal characteristics of the Near Eastern material record, including the intellectual frameworks within which monuments have been approached and interpreted. It seeks to look across the field to consider crucial operative concepts governing analysis and interpretation, with a deliberately interdisciplinary emphasis. **Part III** surveys the field's most distinctive and characteristic genres, with special reference to Mesopotamian art and architecture, which have traditionally dominated research and publication. **Part IV** considers involvement with artistic traditions across a broader reach, examining connections with Egypt, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean. **Part V** addresses intersections with the closely allied discipline of archaeology and the institutional stewardship of cultural heritage in the modern Middle East. “Luxury arts,” a category traditionally defined as small-scale works in exotic and costly materials, have been admirably treated recently in lavishly illustrated exhibition catalogues and are discussed in the context of broader topics rather than in a separate chapter.

Because the volume treats its subject from multiple perspectives, overlap in discussion of particular objects or contributions by key scholars is inevitable. I have opted for a detailed index instead of extensive cross-referencing within chapters, in order to minimize disruptions in authors' arguments or presentation. Each chapter is considered independent, with cross-references limited primarily to illustrations in other chapters.

Finally, although we are ostensibly focused on antiquity, that past is inextricably intertwined with the present. No volume on Near Eastern antiquity published in this century could fail to acknowledge either the

devastation to cultural heritage resulting from foreign invasions and civil wars, or the heroism of those who have sought to preserve it. These conflicts have savaged archaeological sites and museums, along with the professional staff responsible for protecting these institutions and material record. Pre-Islamic antiquities have constituted a primary target for forces of “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq. Among countless other human tragedies, this situation presents profound and enduring challenges to the safety of sites and museum collections, as well as to the study and publication of material housed in local or national museums. This task, and promoting awareness of it, is a global responsibility.*Ann C. Gunter*

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Northwestern University

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Abbreviations

ASOR

American Schools of Oriental Research

CAD

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CANE

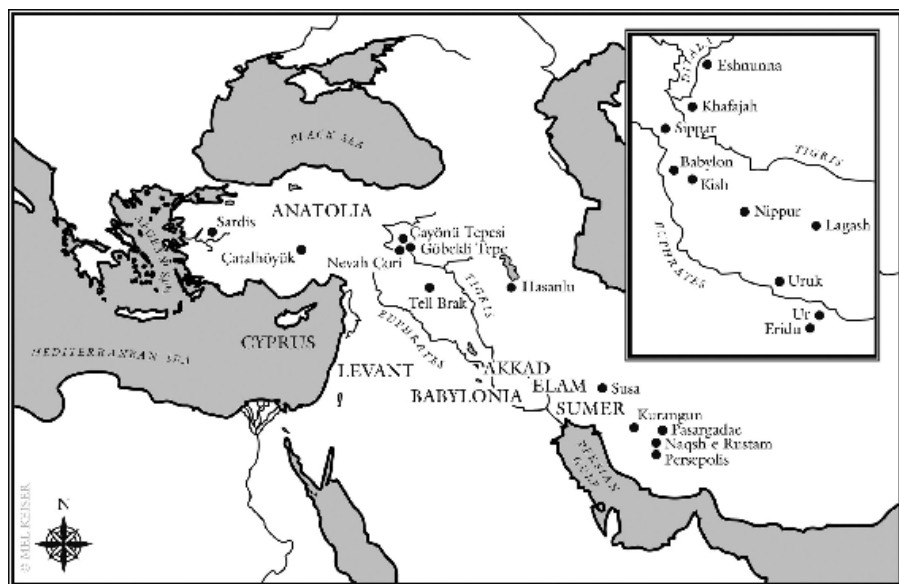
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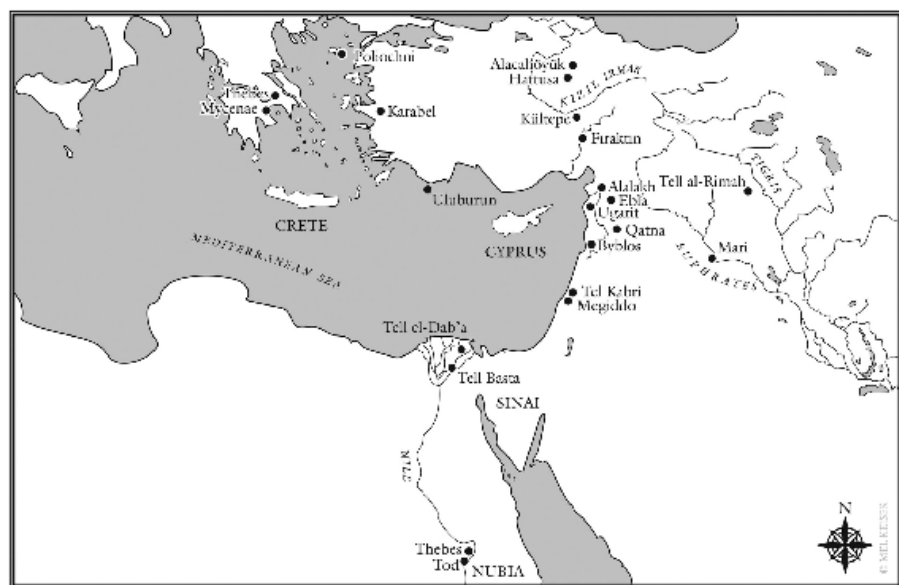
Reallexikon der Assyriologie

E. Ebeling et al., eds., *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*. Berlin, 1928–.



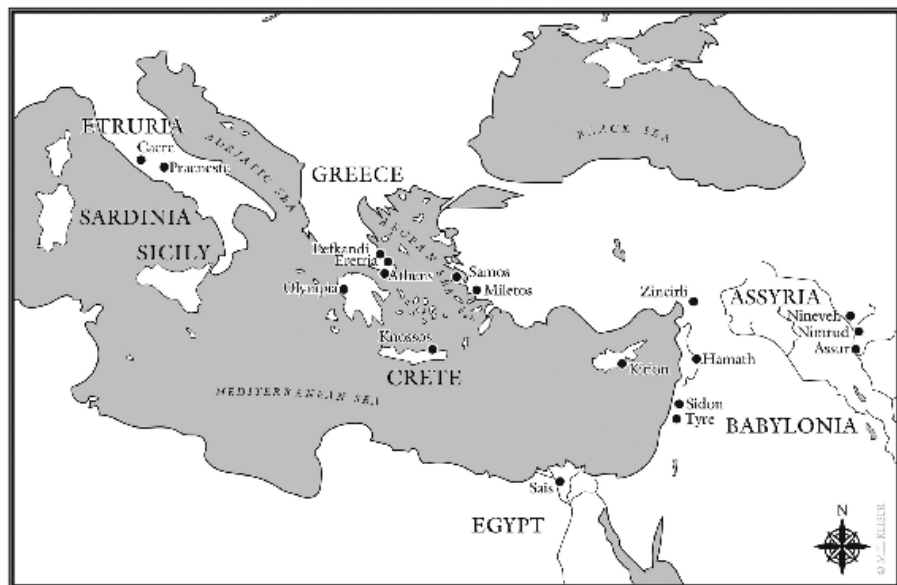
Map 1 The Ancient Near East with major regions and selected sites.

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Map 2 The Eastern Mediterranean and Near East (ca. 3000–1200 BCE).

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Map 3 The Mediterranean and Near East (ca. 1200–600 BCE).

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CHAPTER ONE

The “Art” of the “Ancient Near East”

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Introduction

By general agreement, *ancient Near East* designates the region extending from modern Turkey to Afghanistan, from the Black Sea to Yemen and Oman. Sometimes it includes Egypt, and it may thus correspond approximately to the current term *Middle East*. But precisely what it encompasses, how it functions as a rubric governing description and analysis, and where its antiquity begins and ends, are matters of some debate. How did this area come to comprise a distinct and independent cultural sphere in the modern scholarly imagination? Are we justified in continuing to treat its material record as a meaningful unit, and if so, why and how? In short, what is our purview?

And when we speak of the “art” of the ancient Near East, do we use a label or concept consistent with prevalent or persistent notions in its constituent cultures, or do we impose an anachronistic (and thus inappropriate) modern construct? In this chapter I distinguish two aspects of this issue, because they entail different sets of questions and have been approached by different groups of specialists. The first involves the critical reception of Near Eastern antiquities in the West, especially following the nineteenth-century rediscovery of Mesopotamian antiquity. The objects initially recovered from archaeological explorations were incorporated into existing aesthetic frameworks established primarily for histories of ancient Greek art, and evaluated accordingly. They gained importance not only as material remains of biblical civilizations, but also for their perceived role as predecessors of Greek art. The second set of questions concerns whether, or to what degree, the modern Western concept of *art* is applicable to the ancient Near Eastern context. Does the term introduce an artificial or misleading view of ancient practices regarding image, representation, and process, suggesting an autonomous aesthetic sphere comparable to modern notions of “fine art”?

The complex reception history of Near Eastern antiquity involved national rivalries, contested sites of cultural and social authority, and unique institutional circumstances (Bohrer 2003). As sculptures, inscriptions, metalwork, and other finds began to enter western European museums, debates turned primarily on the historical significance of these objects and their aesthetic value as deemed by comparison with Greek art. If there is a

general (if implicit and ambivalent) consensus today on what constitutes “ancient Near Eastern art,” it is arguably due largely to modern responses to these artifacts initially generated by Western museums. Display practices, treatments in handbooks, and the circulation of photographs and casts of selected monuments, for example, privileged a relatively small group of objects (chiefly sculptures) as highlights of biblical civilizations and the predecessors of Greek art.

How the field defines or identifies itself, what it considers its core corpus and mission, and the kinds of questions it generates, are crucial; in turn, they determine which publications or professional groups serve to disseminate its research, and where the subject is housed in universities and museums. In recent decades, specialists in the ancient Near East have found new publication venues for their work outside field-specific periodicals, in journals such as the *Art Bulletin* and *Art History*. The ancient Near East, or at least Mesopotamia, is emerging alongside Egypt, Greece, and Rome as an independent field of ancient art, to judge from its representation in prestigious lecture series devoted to the history of art, globally conceived: the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at the universities of Cambridge (Irene Winter in 1996) and Oxford (Zainab Bahrani in 2010–11); and the Andrew W. Mellon Lectures, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (Irene Winter in 2005).

Defining the “Ancient Near East”

The most commonly used designation for ancient southwest Asia reflects early modern labels for the regions east of Europe, beginning with the Ottoman Empire—the “nearest” East (or Orient)—along with their Eurocentric perspective. In 1916, the Egyptologist and archaeologist James Henry Breasted coined the term “Fertile Crescent” to emphasize the critical zone in southwest Asia that, together with the Nile Valley, was the cradle of Western civilization. That same era invented the *Middle East* to serve evolving Western geopolitical interests in the western lands of the Ottoman Empire (Scheffler 2003). The field of scholarship devoted to investigating its ancient material and written remains, developed in the nineteenth century, has largely retained the label that dominated its formative phase.

The *ancient Near East* is often defined as a geographical region whose precise borders fluctuated over time, expanding to embrace Egypt, Central Asia, or Arabia depending on historical period. But the subject its historians actually investigate is “the Sumero-Akkadian culture and its network of interactions with neighboring cultures,” observes Guy Bunnens (2006: 267); “it is only a matter of convenience if we refer to its development as ‘ancient Near Eastern history’ because, contrary to what this phrase suggests, geography is not the main defining factor.” Does this focus also extend to the material record

revealed through archaeological investigations? Written and illustrated accounts documenting the ruins at Persepolis and other pre-Islamic sites in western Iran circulated in Europe long before the explorations in northern Mesopotamia that unearthed Assyrian palaces and associated sculptures (Sancisi-Weerdenburg and Drijvers 1991). But is what we now call “ancient Near Eastern art”—like “ancient Near Eastern history”—actually Mesopotamian culture and its network of interactions (as with Porada 1995)?

Henri Frankfort’s influential survey *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, first published in 1954, explicitly defined the ancient Near East as the geographical region extending from modern Turkey and the eastern Mediterranean coast to Iran (Frankfort [1954] 1996). But its constituent parts were not equal, in his view; originality and artistic maturity required the political stability found only in the two distinct centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Frankfort’s survey and interpretation assumed a Mesopotamian core surrounded by politically unstable “peripheral regions”—Syria, Asia Minor (Anatolia), and Persia (Iran)—whose accomplishments in the visual arts never matched their acknowledged literary achievements. This alleged lack of originality was especially true of Syria and Anatolia; “Persia alone among the peripheral regions possessed an individual style” (Frankfort [1954] 1996: 333). Another authoritative survey published in the following decade, Anton Moortgat’s *The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (1969), while confined to the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, presented a similar view of the “peripheral regions”—albeit without explicitly referring to Frankfort’s book.

Mesopotamian art, as Moortgat’s subtitle announced, was the “classical art of the Near East.” The unity of Mesopotamian culture, he asserted, emerged from its foundation in the Sumero-Akkadian religion and worldview, which persisted from the third to the first millennium BCE. Sumerian and Akkadian art, and its heirs the art of the Babylonians and Assyrians, formed “the central classical stem of ancient Near Eastern art, in comparison with which all the other arts, such as that of the Elamites, Hittites or Phoenicians, were of only peripheral importance” (Moortgat 1969: ix).

Employing the overarching rubric *ancient Near East* to describe and analyze its material remains offers advantages and disadvantages. It encourages us to treat this region as a unit from prehistory through historic times, although the longue durée perspective perhaps applies more convincingly to some areas than to others. For prehistoric times, for example, other geographical configurations may replace the unit embraced by “Sumero-Akkadian culture and its network of interactions.” In the revised Propyläen Kunstgeschichte series published in the mid-1970s, Near Eastern antiquity was divided between two volumes. *Frühe Stufen der Kunst* addressed “the beginnings of art” across the eastern Mediterranean and Near East from the Aegean to the Indus Valley, including Egypt and “Africa”; a separate section treated the beginnings of art in Europe, from Paleolithic times to the Iron Age (Mellink

and Filip 1974). *Der Alte Orient* covered historical periods, dominated by developments in Sumer and Akkad, Babylon and Assur, but also including chapters on the art of Iran, the Hittites, Syria, Cyprus, and Minoan and Mycenaean art (Orthmann 1975). A narrow focus on a geographical definition of the region also discourages attention to the broader impact of material culture beyond its ill-defined and fluctuating borders. Objects found too far outside the ancient Near East—however indisputably authentic and of Near Eastern origin—are often effectively ceded to the scholars who operate in that other cultural sphere. As a result, specialists in ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology seldom address finds recovered from Greek sanctuaries or Etruscan tombs, for example, which they consider outside their jurisdiction.

Thus, we might reasonably ask whether “the ancient Near East” in fact persists as a meaningful unit for research and publication in academic and museum arenas, or represents instead an arcane and largely fossilized term reflecting the field’s nineteenth-century origins (and thus uninformative to those outside a narrow circle). In practice, a regional or nationally circumscribed focus often prevails with respect to fieldwork, academic training, museum collections research, and scholarly publication. Foreign schools and institutes established after World War I and World War II founded country- or area-specific journals covering all periods of antiquity (and sometimes also later sites and monuments): *Syria*, *Iraq*, *Iran*, *Baghdader Mitteilungen*, *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*, and *Damaszener Mitteilungen*, among others. University faculty and museum curators ordinarily specialize in Mesopotamia, the Levant, Iran, or Anatolia. Recently published handbooks organized by geographical region—Anatolia, the Levant, and Iran—seem to reflect this practice (Steadman and McMahon 2011; Potts 2013; Steiner and Killebrew 2014). Meanwhile, alternative collectivities have emerged, such as “cuneiform culture” (Radner and Robson 2011). Well-documented geographical and cultural subdivisions—Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia, for example—likewise furnish historical terms that define a valid research domain. The articles that have appeared thus far in the Oxford Bibliographies Online Art History module pursue this direction (Seymour 2014; Collins 2016), as do recent publications intended for a wider readership (Leick 2007; Crawford 2013). New periodicals may opt to define their readership by region or culture province, perhaps simultaneously addressing priorities in current practices: for example, the *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* (2013–). Others, like the *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* (2009–), emphasize instead the interwoven (“global”) canvas and overlapping concerns of much contemporary scholarship devoted to the ancient world.

Ancient Near East is thus arguably more an outdated, if useful, convention than a dynamic concept productively governing the ways in which scholars now define their areas of expertise. Yet the term’s continued vitality as an

operative rubric, describing a meaningful, broadly understood, and intertwined research domain, is also reflected in the titles of recently founded publications and professional organizations. Examples include the monograph series *Culture and History of the Ancient Near East* (2000–), the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* (2002–), and the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* (2014–). The International Congresses on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICAANE), established in 1998 by several European universities, sponsor a biennial gathering and publish the proceedings.

Periodization and Chronology of the “Ancient” Near East

When does the “ancient” Near East begin and conclude? Histories conventionally commence with the earliest written records in Mesopotamia and Iran dating to the late fourth millennium BCE, acknowledging a lengthy prehistoric occupation that demonstrates cultural continuity with historical times. The periodization introduced by histories of dynasties, kingdoms, and empires, beginning in the early third millennium, also serves histories of art and architecture, many of whose key monuments and contexts derive from political and religious centers under royal or imperial patronage. Beyond Mesopotamia, the archaeologically defined sequence of Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages furnishes a common framework.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, the “ancient” Near East may conclude anywhere between the mid-sixth century BCE and the mid-seventh century CE. Nineteenth-century authors emphatically terminated ancient Near Eastern art with the passing of the torch to Greece, a periodization echoed in some twentieth-century surveys: “Egypt and Mesopotamia were the focal points of civilization from about 3000 until 500 B.C., when Greece took the lead” (Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 11). The conquests of Alexander the Great in the 330s BCE, ushering in an era of Hellenization from Egypt to Central Asia, are often chosen to signal this divide. Alternatively, the “ancient Near East” may close with the formation of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE) or quite specifically with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. A prolonged duration for Near Eastern antiquity emphasizes continuity of tradition in building plan, construction methods, or subject matter across dramatic changes in political organization and centralized rule. Barthel Hrouda’s (1971) handbook on the archaeology of the Near East included Seleucid and Parthian monuments exhibiting long-established indigenous traditions in religious or palatial architecture. Under certain circumstances, especially in the case of Iran, “antiquity” continues through the Sasanian era to the beginning of Islam and thus equates with “pre-Islamic” (Porada 1965; Collon 1995; Potts 2013).

Absolute chronologies furnished in many surveys, specialized publications, and online collections databases generally follow the “middle chronology,” which dates the reign of the Old Babylonian king Hammurabi from 1792 to 1750 BCE. Alternative “high” and “low” chronologies differ in how they calculate these dates (“high” = 1848–1806 BCE/ “low” = 1728–1686 BCE). This high-middle-low scheme of chronological reckoning ultimately derives from ancient observations of synodic phases of the planet Venus repeated in cycles of fifty-six or sixty-four years that are mentioned on tablets dating many centuries after Hammurabi’s reign. Many of the observations, however, are questionable and must be excluded from calculations of absolute dates. In recent decades, Mesopotamian chronology of the second millennium BCE has been extensively investigated and debated among scholars working with different kinds of data, including evidence from king lists, eponym lists, ceramic typologies, astronomical observations, radiocarbon dates, and dendrochronology (Gasche et al. 1998; Armstrong and Gasche 2014). While most scholars find it convenient to continue using the “middle chronology,” the validity of these dates remains highly uncertain. This unresolved issue has profound consequences for dating and interpreting the history of Mesopotamia and its neighbors before ca. 1000 BCE, and especially before ca. 1400 BCE.

Modern Frameworks for an “Ancient Near Eastern Art”

The rediscovery of ancient civilizations in the Tigris and Euphrates Valley is generally told as a story of archaeological exploration, beginning with early nineteenth-century European travelers and diplomats in the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire (Chevalier 2012). Narrated as a chronicle of archaeological and Assyriological discoveries, it emphasizes the investigation of key Assyrian sites in northern Mesopotamia beginning in the 1830s, then in the south: Babylonia, Sumer, and Akkad. Retold more specifically within the context of this volume, our account would emphasize the critical role that museums in western Europe, and later in North America, played in developing a trajectory we could label as *art history*. Crucial to this process was the role of scholars—often museum professionals—initially trained in Greek art, who embraced within their purview the objects recovered from Mesopotamia that were relocated to national museums in Paris, London, and later Berlin (Porada 1995: 2698–701). There they were juxtaposed with sculptures from Greece and Egypt (in the British Museum) or with sculptures from the ancient Mediterranean along with western European sculptures from Renaissance through modern times (in the Louvre Museum) (Bohrer 2003:

74–84, 105–31). The immediate and practical concerns—where and how to display Assyrian sculptures in universal museums where classical statuary reigned supreme—gave the issue both prominence and urgency. By contrast, seals and other miscellaneous small objects that had previously reached Europe could be accommodated to similar types of objects in antiquarian studies or catalogues of public or private collections (Eppihimer 2015). Moreover, those earlier finds scarcely rivaled, either in scale or dramatic impact, the imposing remains of biblical civilizations uncovered in large quantities beginning around mid-century.

The arrival of Near Eastern antiquities in European museums precipitated sharp disagreement over their aesthetic quality—and thus also their art historical significance—explicitly *by comparison with Greek sculpture*. Greek art provided a paradigm both for the ideal subject matter (the human figure) and developmental sequence (the growth and triumph of naturalism). Austen Henry Layard, excavator of Nimrud and Nineveh, championed his finds, but Richard Westmacott, professor of sculpture at the Royal Academy London from 1827, decisively rejected the value of the “Nineveh Marbles” on these grounds. They might ultimately have value for the content of their inscriptions, he acknowledged, but as art they were “very bad” (Bohrer 2003: 124). Later in the century, explorations in southern Mesopotamia yielded freestanding and relief sculptures from the earlier Sumerian and Akkadian cultures, most prominently the finds from French excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu). Many of these artifacts were praised for their formal sophistication and technical skill. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century publications increasingly labeled them not merely as antiquities, but as *art* (Heuzey 1891–1915; Andrae 1925). By the late nineteenth century, the finds from Mesopotamia and neighboring regions—Egypt, Phoenicia, Phrygia, and Lycia, among others—appeared in a ten-volume history of art in antiquity written by Georges Perrot and Charles Chipiez (1882–1914). These authors traced the developments in sculpture, architecture, painting, and minor arts (“arts industriels”) that preceded, and paved the way for, the achievements of ancient Greece. These “arts imparfaits,” as Perrot and Chipiez described them, were catalogued according to “national” or ethnically defined regions, but collectively viewed as precursors to the “perfect” art of ancient Greece. To a significant degree, the sculpture, paintings, and architecture of the ancient Near East emerged as *art* through their service as precursors of Greek art.

By contrast, a later chapter in the aesthetic debate profoundly revised earlier judgments. In this instance, Near Eastern antiquities emerged not as “imperfect” precursors to Greek art, but as visually powerful and accomplished works by comparison with the arts of any era. As in the nineteenth century, sculpture played a paramount role. Contemporary artists and sculptors, particularly those involved in the modernist direct carving movement of the first half of the twentieth century, enthusiastically embraced

Assyrian stone sculptures along with examples from other cultural spheres, such as Egypt and India. These large-scale specimens—many housed in the British Museum and thus readily available for close observation—presented themselves as models and sources of inspiration for sculptors such as Jacob Epstein, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Henry Moore, and Barbara Hepworth (Arrowsmith 2011). Jean Evans (2012: 63–65) has reminded us of Frankfort’s interest in modern art and acquaintance with some of these sculptors.

Incorporating Near Eastern works in universal art history surveys further enshrined them both as precursors to Greek art and as “art.” With their teleological underpinnings, moreover, these surveys tended either to flatten distinctions among ancient cultures (collectively “pre-Greek”) or to forge stereotypes drawn from a handful of works, mostly sculptures, housed in a few western European museums. Thus, these surveys also helped establish a “canon,” a select group of “masterpieces” explicitly linked with much broader trends in the history of art, globally conceived. The first edition of Helen Gardner’s *Art through the Ages: An Introduction to its History and Significance*, published in 1926, included a chapter on “Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldaean, and Persian Periods,” emphasizing Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian sculptures housed in the British Museum and the Louvre. Subsequent editions of this standard English-language textbook have gradually incorporated a few additional, more recently excavated objects. Even finds from Neolithic sites, such as modeled skulls from Jericho, wall paintings or figurines from Çatalhöyük, or carved pillars from Göbekli Tepe could be heralded and framed as the “earliest” examples of genres considered ancestral to familiar Western “fine arts” categories: sculpture, painting, and portraiture (Kleiner 2014: 24–26).

A broadly similar selection of objects often appears in handbooks, histories, or exhibitions devoted to “ancient Near Eastern art”: a consensus largely driven by permanent museum displays, catalogues, and guidebooks that isolate or highlight individual works and circulate images for reproduction in surveys and other publications. Perhaps also at work is the idea, inherited from the nineteenth century, that we should find familiar notions about monuments and representation in these civilizations so closely tied to our Western foundations. While new critical perspectives in recent decades have unquestionably advanced understanding of the field and its theoretical sophistication, they have arguably addressed too small a group of monuments (chiefly Mesopotamian sculptures) housed in Western museums since the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, thus perpetuating rather than reconfiguring or abandoning traditional “fine arts” categories of sculpture, glyptic, and architecture. And yet pursuit of novel research directions in art history and other disciplines, toward topics such as gender and class, has simultaneously expanded the universe of objects comprising “ancient Near Eastern art” to include lead figurines, terracotta plaques, and jewelry. That

these studies are published in books or journals whose titles bear the words *art history* or *ancient Near Eastern art* indicates the elasticity of the terms and the broad audience for these investigations, which clearly extends far beyond specialists. How the availability of online museum collections databases and other resources, such as ARTstor, might shape the contours of “ancient Near Eastern art” is not yet clear, but clearly holds considerable potential to do so (Feldman 2016).¹

Did the Ancient Near East in Fact Produce “Art”?

This volume’s title asserts that there is a widely recognized category of objects and monuments that scholars agree to approach from this perspective, and that it lends itself to methods of observation, documentation, and interpretation developed for the broader discipline of art history. It thus posits a category of *art* that can be distinguished from the comprehensive universe of material remains recovered through archaeological investigation. Does it thereby mask or misrepresent significant differences with the modern West in notions about material and its transformation through human activity? Are we justified in privileging among the material remains of this region a category called *art*, a term that typically implies both a unique cultural status and a specially trained or gifted producer—an *artist* rather than a *craftsman*?

Critics argue that there is no term in ancient languages of the Near East that closely corresponds to “art” (or “fine arts”), and that venerating objects removed from their archaeological contexts is both intellectually and ethically indefensible. In their view, this perspective ignores, or at least downplays, the crucial significance of context and helps fuel an illicit traffic in antiquities that can be advertised as “works of art.” That global demand for antiquities for private and public collections drives looting, theft, and illegal export is undeniable. National scholarly traditions are also at play in this debate. In the European model of *Altorientalistik*, the study of “art historical” categories—sculpture, glyptic, or architecture, for example—is embraced by the field of Near Eastern archaeology and taught in conjunction with philology and history, while “ancient Near Eastern art” (or “art history”) is more commonly encountered as a subfield or departmental title in museums and universities in the United States. But if the modern “fine arts” framework is poorly suited to the circumstances of producing or appreciating images and other media that prevailed in ancient southwest Asia, how should we describe our material and reconstruct its aims and impact?

Drawing on Mesopotamia’s rich and lengthy textual record, specialists have recently sought to identify notions about the aesthetic sphere through detailed analysis of the vocabulary surrounding images, decoration, the built environment, and aesthetic experience more broadly, with significant results.

Building on philological groundwork, they have examined Sumerian and Akkadian words and expressions concerned with aesthetic response, as revealed in a variety of written sources: royal inscriptions and correspondence, responses to oracular inquiries, temple hymns, and cult inventories, among others (Sasson 1990; Winter 2002, 2008). Texts describing the making of objects or the construction and furnishing of temples and palaces emphasize the skill and knowledge of successful practitioners. Terms employed in evaluating works give prominence to the intrinsic value of component materials (precious metals or stones) and praise consummate workmanship. A related direction in the “textual turn” analyzes the lexicon generally translated as “statue,” “image,” and “representation,” exploring the ontological status of these objects and their cultural meaning (Winter 1992; Bonatz 2002; Bahrani 2003, 2014; Nadali 2012, 2014; Bonatz and Heinz, this volume; Selz, this volume). Examined in conjunction with or in addition to written sources, archaeological evidence for acquiring, displaying, abducting, and destroying objects has been freshly probed, further elaborating the cultural meaning of the material world (Bahrani 2003; Evans 2012; May 2012), as have phenomenological approaches to reconstructing multisensory experience in the built environment (McMahon 2013, with bibliography). In association, these investigations document a specific and long-lived tradition in Mesopotamia that combines aesthetic and emotional responses, complex and original notions of representation, and an emphasis on the sacred arena for the display of valued objects.

Scholars of the ancient Near East are not alone in debating whether the term *art* appropriately labels any of the artifacts within their purview. Specialists dealing with ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome have recently offered thoughtful reappraisals, and this literature is instructive because the debates in fact share many specific concerns across divergent, if historically related, cultural spheres (Squire 2010; Baines 2015). Indeed, in this respect the once sharp boundaries separating these areas are becoming increasingly blurred. Classicists observe that neither Greek *techne* nor Latin *ars* neatly corresponds to *art* (or *fine arts*), and note the key role of material and workmanship in the ancient discourse on aesthetic experience. Some have altogether rejected the premise that there is a distinctively modern system of “the arts” that fundamentally differs from classical antiquity (Porter 2010). Egypt has yielded an extraordinary record of monuments and texts, yet relatively little critical commentary on aesthetic experience or neat counterpart to the term *art*. Fresh approaches to elaborating culturally specific concepts have adopted an expansive view, seeking to articulate “a range of aesthetically ordered activity” (Baines 2015). Moreover, scholars in all of these fields also face similar methodological challenges in documenting or interpreting aesthetic response in their respective domains, since few famous works have survived. In all cases, too, we study objects and buildings now typically incomplete, lacking precisely many of the materials or finishing treatments—paint, or

inlays made of precious metals or stones, for example—that determined their value in antiquity. Recent investigations of polychromy and gilding on statuary, relief carvings, and architecture acknowledge and address this crucial fact (for the ancient Near Eastern sphere, see Nagel [2013](#), with bibliography). Even the alleged paradigm of famous artists and innovators long intertwined with early modern European notions of individuality and originality in artist and authorship has itself been challenged. Critics have called attention to the highly formulaic character of artist biographies, for example (Soussloff [1997](#); Ruffini [2011](#)).

But even if we can begin to articulate an intellectually coherent and persistent tradition of aesthetic response in the ancient Near East, or at least in Mesopotamia, what about identifying individual agency in the creative process? Can we write histories of *art*—however that aesthetic dimension is culturally defined—without *artists*? Greeks are conventionally credited with initiating an environment hospitable to artistic creativity and individuality, signing their works and elevating the status of “craftsman” to “artist.” Scholars often draw a sharp contrast between Mesopotamia and Greece with respect to notions of originality and personal style. They tend to stress the conditions of anonymity and suppressed individuality that presumably governed artisans employed in Near Eastern palaces and temples, picturing a corps of bureaucrats bound by artistic formulas that were in turn dictated by political and religious conservatism and perpetuated by copy-oriented technologies such as grids and molds. These views have deeply and widely influenced perceptions about ancient Mesopotamia and are sometimes cited even today (e.g., Hurwit [2015](#): 17).

Yet specialists in Greek art have increasingly questioned the assumption that originality and individual artistic personality were highly venerated throughout classical antiquity. Recent research on Greek sculpture has challenged a fundamental aim of its modern scholarship: the search to identify the original features and individual style of master sculptors named in much later Roman accounts. Ancient sources celebrated the colossal size and rich materials of the chryselephantine Athena Parthenos, for example, and its sculptor Pheidias’s ability to express the gods’ majesty—not his personal style. And technical studies have demonstrated that casting large-scale bronze sculptures—the medium par excellence of the ancient Greek “masters”—required the mechanical reproduction of a preliminary form through the use of molds. “Emphasis on the Great Masters has diminished,” Brunilde S. Ridgway concludes, “in the realization that originality and distinctive manner are modern constructs, and that fame in antiquity could accrue for size and materials and not necessarily for stylistic appreciation” (Ridgway [2005](#): 70). This observation suggests more affinity with than distance from the celebration of valuable materials and fine workmanship that characterize aesthetic judgment in Mesopotamian texts. Nor is it even far removed from

the Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim's famous assertion that "the personality of the [Mesopotamian] artist ... remains completely beyond our reach" (Oppenheim 1964: 329).

At the same time, students of Mesopotamian literature have also reconsidered received notions about originality, creativity, and authorial voice. Names of individual authors are indeed known, and sometimes mentioned in a text, as with Kabti-ilani-Marduk, author of the *Epic of Erra*. The notion of genius, writes Benjamin Foster (2011: 131–32), "privileges, perhaps unfairly, the highly original that breaks with or sets a new tradition, rather than creativity within a given set of patterns and expectations." Historians have begun to explore topics once considered far outside the ancient Near Eastern purview: competitiveness as a distinctive cultural value or trait, for example, or the crucial role of an individual's name and fame (Radner 2005, 2011; van Wees 2011). In the material realm, developments in pictorial narrative can now be investigated as artistic "experiments" inspired by contacts with specific monuments at a particular moment in time, rather than attributed vaguely to "outside influence" (Kaelin 1999).²

A chief argument for Greek "exceptionalism" in the celebration of individuality was—and remains—the signatures preserved on multiple categories of objects, including gems, architecture, wall paintings, vases, and sculptures (Hurwit 2015). Yet "signatures" that can plausibly be claimed to identify the name of the individual maker of an object in fact appear on only a small fraction of Greek antiquities, and, even then, cannot always be neatly correlated with individually bounded styles. Studies of signatures on works of art in other cultural spheres offer additional grounds for doubts (Seyller 1987; Clunas 1991: 60–71; Barbieri-Low 2007: 75, 78–79). Moreover, we know from administrative, legal, and other texts the names of many individuals who worked as trained artisans or craftsmen in the ancient Near East.

Correspondence between Neo-Assyrian kings and their court scholars further elaborates the role of these "experts" (Gunter 2009: 159–64; Nadali 2012: 587; Neumann 2014: 136–50). A remarkable inscription of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) records the divine consultation that preceded his refurbishing of Babylonian cult images housed in the Esharra Temple in Assur and the response: "they revealed to me the names of the artisans (fit) for completing the work."³ And artisans other than court scholars could apparently achieve individual reputations. A letter to Sargon replied to a royal request: "As to Šimkaya, the axe-maker from Damascus whom [the king], my lord, wrote me about, I am herewith sending him to the king ... in the charge of my messenger" (Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990: no. 71).

After all, Mesopotamia, too, had its etiological "great men" tradition, if more frequently preserved in autobiographical than in biographical accounts. The Sumerian epic *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* credits Enmerkar, King of Uruk and Lord of Kullaba, with the spontaneous invention of writing to assist

his messenger in reciting a lengthy oral account. Neo-Assyrian kings, especially Sennacherib, claimed not only expert knowledge of working with materials for building and decorating, but also the invention of new and complex technologies for casting bronze (Winter 2008). As in ancient Greece, the design and execution of large-scale buildings and monuments “on the ground” required teams of artisans working to achieve a homogeneous style. And, undermining a literary tradition of heroic invention, Sumerian texts reveal that writing and measuring were considered divine gifts to humanity, practiced by anonymous humans, goddesses, kings, gods, and named humans—and scarcely ever by legendary heroes (Robson 2013: 56–60).

Comparative Approaches

Given the limited sources available for investigating many aspects of artistic production we wish to know more about, could we perhaps turn to other, better-documented cultural spheres for information or assistance? Under what circumstances might evidence of practices recorded or observed in historically related or unrelated societies be introduced as useful, or methodologically sound?

Neither the field of Assyriology nor the study of the ancient Near Eastern material record has traditionally encouraged comparative studies; on the contrary, both sought independence from other disciplines or scholarly agendas by prioritizing contextualization. Assyriology struggled to liberate itself from biblical studies, asserting that the ancient Near East merited investigation on its own terms. Comparisons with Greece almost inevitably cast the ancient Near East as a worthy but flawed predecessor, valued above all for its “gifts” to Greek (and therefore Western) civilization (Gunter 2009: 62–66). Thus, Henri Frankfort declared that “ancient Near Eastern art deserves to be studied for its own sake” rather than as a prelude to later Western developments ([1954] 1996: 12). Early studies of “the birth of civilization” in Egypt and Mesopotamia tended either to blur distinctions between these two “high civilizations” or to sharpen them, in order neatly to *contrast* Egypt with Mesopotamia (or “the ancient Near East”). The “environment and culture” perspective assumed dramatic differences between these two river valley civilizations in climate and natural resources, and consequently also between the cultures they fostered.⁴

Two approaches—comparisons and analogies—may usefully be distinguished here, as Norman Yoffee has recently advised. “Analogies require a structure in which two entities that share some similarities are assumed to share many others, that there are underlying principles of connection between the source-side and the side that is the subject of the investigation,” he writes. “Comparison, as opposed to analogy, entails the examination of two or more

entities with the view of discovering resemblances and differences between them” (Yoffee 2005: 193–94). Specialists have occasionally turned to ethnoarchaeology to shed light on the artifacts they uncover, and not least on the craft processes that produced them. This subfield studies modern material culture in “traditional” societies as analogies, or at least signposts, for interpreting the evidence of past societies. Similarly, experimental archaeology (or replication) works from detailed analysis of surviving specimens to reconstruct the processes, materials, and tools used to fashion and decorate them (Moorey 1994: 17–18; Schorsch, this volume).

Comparative studies drawing on ethnography have mostly focused on technologies and types of artifacts that appear in prehistoric contexts. Comparison of female figurines made from clay and stone in prehistoric societies is a well-known example. Formal similarities among these objects across a wide geographical expanse were long thought to indicate a like similarity in meaning, in this case as female divinities or even a single, primordial “Mother Goddess.” More recently, ethnographic research on figurines in Africa, Asia, and the Americas helped define functional classes—such as toys, initiation figures, and vehicles of magic—that could assist in analyzing figurines from archaeological contexts. Although not without its critics, this approach offered a new direction in the study of prehistoric anthropomorphic images (Lesure 2011: esp. 130–31; Green, this volume).

Comparisons with phenomena in geographically and historically unrelated spheres are unusual, but recent efforts demonstrate their promise. Irene Winter’s comparison of cult images in Mesopotamia and India is one example (Winter 2000). Complex and perceptive insights into subject, audience, and reception emerge from Dominik Bonatz’s analysis of Neo-Assyrian and Khmer narrative reliefs (Bonatz 2013). The advantages of such investigations extend beyond the potential to introduce perspectives on seemingly familiar monuments or traditions: itself a worthy goal. They also bring the ancient Near East and its remarkable material record into conversation with other cultural spheres. Such a dialogue represents a significant step outside the role that long defined the field, that of precursor to Greek art.

Conclusions

Ongoing debates over what constitutes the ancient Near East, and how to describe and analyze its material remains, furnish important opportunities to engage productively with crucial historical and methodological issues. A long tradition of scholarship positioned Mesopotamia and its neighbors in a developmental sequence that culminated in Greek artistic perfection. Newer research directions have constructively expanded the corpus conventionally comprising “ancient Near Eastern art,” encouraging still more fluid

boundaries between “archaeology” and “art history.” Engaging with other cultural spheres also holds rich potential to stimulate additional productive reflections on our enterprise.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Recent surveys of ancient Near Eastern history include Liverani [2014](#) and Van De Mieroop [2015](#). While we lack a detailed historiography of ancient Near Eastern art history, recent studies of pioneer scholars helpfully move in this direction. For Henri Frankfort, see especially Wengrow [1999](#), Taylor [2011](#), and Evans [2012](#). The papers in Bleibtreu and Steymans [2014](#) describe the contributions of Edith Porada, best known for her magisterial work on cylinder seals but also for innovative studies of the art of pre-Islamic Iran (Porada [1965](#)). Porada [1995](#) offers her own, personal account of the field’s history. For German scholarship, see especially Hrouda [1971](#): 307–10; Renger [1979](#); Bachmann [1996](#); Hrouda, Nagel, and Strommenger [2009](#); Bonatz [2011](#). Mariana Giovino’s (2007) thoughtful (and exceptional) investigation of the “Assyrian sacred tree” as a history of interpretation of the image demonstrates the potential for, and rewards of, this kind of analysis.

Gunter [1990](#) and Nadali [2014](#) address the debate over *art* and *artist* in the ancient Near Eastern context. For related debates concerning Egypt and Greco-Roman history, see Baines [2015](#) and the papers introduced by Squire [2010](#) (including Porter [2010](#)).

Classical reception studies have generated a significant literature in recent decades, and studies of “Egyptomania” abound (Moser [2015](#)). By comparison, the modern reception of the ancient Near East is as yet an incipient research field. Studies addressing Mesopotamia include Bohrer [2003](#); Holloway [2006](#); Bilsel [2012](#): 159–88; Evans [2012](#); and Chi and Azara [2015](#). For Iran, see Daftari [1988](#) and Grigor [2009](#). An important new direction investigates the role of archaeology and the reception of antiquities within the modern Middle East for their crucial role in establishing national museums and underwriting nationalist movements (Bernhardsson [2005](#); Shaw [2007](#); Abdi [2008](#)) and authoritarian regimes (Grigor [2009](#); Mousavi [2012](#): 155–92). Oscar W. Muscarella has extensively documented the manufacture of fakes and forged provenances, demonstrating the complex interaction of local and global practices and the outsize influence of private collectors and dealers, with profoundly destructive consequences (Muscarella [2013](#), [2014](#), both with bibliography).

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NOTES

- 1 Amy Gansell and Ann Shafer have spearheaded a research project investigating the formation and development of the ancient Near Eastern “canon”; their forthcoming edited volume, *Testing the Canon of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology*, will contribute significantly to this discussion.
- 2 See also the stimulating papers in Galán, Bryan, and Dorman 2014.
- 3 This translation follows Walker and Dick 2001: 26, with minor modifications. My thanks to Steven W. Cole for advice on translating this passage. For the text, see Leichty 2011: no. 48.
- 4 For a different approach, see Ataç 2006.

PART I

APPROACHES AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER TWO

Art and Material Culture

David Wengrow

Introduction

In December 2007, a small stone figure with a human body and leonine head became, for a short while, the most expensive piece of sculpture ever sold at auction. The price it fetched, on the order of \$57 million, was roughly double that reached earlier the same year by Pablo Picasso's bronze bust of Dora Maar. The standing figure was sold at Sotheby's in New York. It had no known archaeological source, having first come to the attention of scholars through its purchase in Baghdad by a private collector in 1931, and subsequent loan to the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1948. In support of an origin within the Proto-Elamite period (ca. 3000–2800 BCE) and culture area (western Iran), the auction catalogue cited authoritative surveys of ancient Near Eastern art and a detailed stylistic analysis by Edith Porada (1950), echoing her view that the figure (despite its small size) conveys an “unmistakable impression of monumentality,” preserving traces of a largely vanished visual milieu from the dawn of urban life and literate civilization.

The sale of the “Guennol Lioness” cemented a complex relationship between Near Eastern art history and the contemporary art world. Jean Evans follows some early threads of that relationship in her *Lives of Sumerian Sculpture* (2012), which explores the impact of 1930s primitivism on the reception of Sumerian (Early Dynastic) statuary from eastern Iraq, and the consequent inclusion of Mesopotamian material culture within the discourse of fine art. As Evans shows, the intellectual concerns and aesthetic preferences of an avant-garde that included Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore provided a context in which anthropomorphic sculpture of the third millennium BCE could be valued for the vigor of its compressed abstract forms, rather than derided for its lack of mimetic realism. A new language of connoisseurship—celebrating the raw power of geometric shapes and masses—elevated the early Mesopotamian sculptor to the level of *Homo aestheticus*, and secured a place for the ancient Near East in the story of art's origins.

In step with these developments of the 1930s and 1940s, which owe much to the fieldwork and interpretive syntheses of Henri Frankfort (e.g., 1939b, 1943), another (very different) vision of “Mesopotamian man” and his place in history was taking shape in the hands of prehistorian V. Gordon Childe. Art historians rarely discuss Childe's work on the ancient Near East. This is

hardly surprising, given his methodological materialism and treatment of the region's early history as an "Oriental prelude to European prehistory." Books such as *New Light on the Most Ancient East* (1935) and *Man Makes Himself* (1936), as well as a remarkable essay on rotary motion (1954), nevertheless made a lasting impact on archaeological thought and the history of technology.

For Childe, the significance of the ancient Near East in world history resided in its technological and intellectual achievements, which led to a revolutionary change in the scale of human social organization (the "Urban Revolution" of the fourth millennium BCE). His exploration of Mesopotamian pre- and proto-history encompassed the discovery of new materials (notably metals) and their modes of transformation, as well as means of harnessing energy (whether through use of the wheel or of animals for transport and traction), and innovations in the fields of writing and mathematics that assisted the centralized management of resources within urban institutions. Through experimentation and skilled practical engagement, humans discovered not only new properties of the material world but also the potential for new forms of social integration that were differently realized in prehistoric Europe and the ancient Near East.

Childe's "Orientalism" has been much critiqued (e.g., Gamble 2007: 19–25), but of greater relevance here, I suggest, is the legacy of a distinction between art and material culture that is neatly embodied in the oeuvres of Frankfort and Childe (see also Wengrow 1999). My purpose in this chapter is twofold: to highlight the enduring influence of that distinction on the interpretation of ancient Near Eastern images; and to point toward some new avenues of interpretation that are opened up in the process of thinking across it. Studies by Roger Moorey (2001) and Irene Winter (2003), dealing respectively with the mobility of artisans (including image-makers) and the indigenous evaluation of craft skills, point the way here, as do Eleanor Robson's (2000; 2008: 45–50) discussions of the relationship between visual culture and calculus. Nevertheless, many challenges remain in recapturing the original unity of *Homo faber* and *Homo aestheticus* in the ancient Near East.

What follows is a preliminary exploration of the possibilities, perhaps supplying more questions than answers. My discussion focuses on three quite specific themes: mechanical reproduction, figuration, and the movement of materials. I devote a significant part to the most ubiquitous source of surviving evidence for the development of ancient Near Eastern visual culture, i.e., cylinder seals and their impressions, which, in their conventional interpretation, present a clear example of the analytical dichotomy between art and material culture at work. I will also introduce a new concept: the "bureaucratic eye." Adapting Michael Baxandall's (1972) "period eye," this notion foregrounds affinities, cognitive and practical, between particular modes of figuration and the administrative milieu in which they arose. My

concluding sections consider the significance of cult statuary as a further way of problematizing the relationship between “art” and “material culture.”

The Mechanical Reproduction of Images

Among the smaller mounds that surround the early urban center of Tell Brak, in northern Syria, is a site known locally as Tell Majnuna (McMahon, Softysiak, and Weber 2011). Recent excavations there uncovered an extensive zone of rubbish deposits dating to the fourth millennium BCE. The deposits were densely packed with discarded manufactured objects of many kinds, including pottery and the waste generated by making stone tools. Their vertical accumulation over a relatively short time span (two centuries or so, ca. 3800–3600 BCE) suggested to the excavators an impressive rate and scale of industrial production. From among these deposits were recovered almost a thousand clay fragments impressed with minuscule but often complex figural designs that project from the surface of the clay. They belong to a class of objects that archaeologists call “sealings”: strips or balls of clay, applied over the mouths of vessels or the thresholds of doorways, and then impressed with one or more seals bearing intaglio designs, which were thereby reproduced on the sealing in raised relief.

Many of the impressed designs from Tell Majnuna are attested in multiple copies, as a result of the same stamp being applied to more than one container (or, more precisely, to their clay sealings). Identical images were found on clay vessel sealings separated by large accumulations of waste, sometimes over a meter high. They comprise an assortment of strange and often counter-intuitive subjects, among them “vultures attacking gazelle or deer, copulating snakes, hybrid human-animal figures, unusual animals shown singly or in groups (e.g., turtles, hedgehogs), geometric or floral designs and complex images involving lions alone or in combat with human figures.”

Understandably, it is this striking visual content that has so far attracted the most elaborate interpretations. Scenes of human-lion combat (Figure 2.1), for instance, have been considered part of an “early iconography of leadership,” standing at the head of a long tradition of Mesopotamian political representation, and reflecting (in their concern with violence and domination) the social turbulence that may have accompanied the development of the first cities (McMahon 2009).



Figure 2.1 Lion-slaying scene impressed onto clay vessel sealing. Syria, Tell Majnuna; early fourth millennium BCE. Tell Brak Expedition TB16859.

Courtesy of Augusta McMahon, Tell Brak Project.

Iconographic interpretation, even in the absence of corresponding written sources, has long been a standard approach to ancient Near Eastern seal imagery. In that respect, the published treatment of the Tell Majnuna sealings fits into an established tradition of research. In considering the relationship between art and material culture, however, it is relevant to ask how an iconographic analysis of this sort can be related to the physical medium through which seal imagery was transmitted? The primary function of the clay sealings from this particular site is demonstrated by markings on their reverse sides, which show that they were once attached to containers of various sorts. These included coiled and woven baskets, reed boxes, leather bags, cloth sacks, and jars. The handling of commodity containers (which were probably used for a range of purposes such as storing or transporting comestibles) therefore provided the main practical context in which seal designs were applied, viewed, and discarded. And yet the relationship between container and image has traditionally played little or no part in the latter's interpretation.

I will return shortly to the role of sealing practices (and commodities) in the early development of urban life, but first I want to consider why the immediate and physical relationships between images (on seals) and objects (containers) are so often elided in contemporary studies. The elision, I suggest, is only partly explained by the analytical conventions of iconographic

analysis (see Panofsky 1939). It should also be understood in terms of the modern status of ancient seals as works of art, considered worthy of collecting and display in galleries and art museums. Today, in exhibitions and catalogues, perfectly executed impressions, applied from ancient seals to modern synthetic materials, are used to display the seal carver's artistry to full visual effect. Ancient seal impressions, by contrast, were often executed hastily in the context of administrative routine. In some cases they reproduce only part of the seal design, and were sometimes just as hastily broken or erased. Modern tastes and intellectual concerns have thus come together to produce unique and durable art objects from the components of an ancient system of mechanical image production, granting the images an "aura" of iconic singularity (*sensu* Benjamin [1936] 1999) that they may never have possessed in their original settings.

In this respect, it is significant that Frankfort's foundational study of *Cylinder Seals* (1939a) was published as a *Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, rather than a treatise on the deep origins of print, bureaucracy, or commodity marking (for which, see now Wengrow 2008). Frankfort began by defining cylinder seals in terms of their primary function (marking and safeguarding "possessions or merchandise") only to immediately abandon this feature of their use, so as to focus upon the more metaphysical aspects of their surface designs. How did the rich surface imagery that he describes—the comings and goings of gods and goddesses, monsters and kings, the intricate scenes of industry and travel, feasting and worship, conquest and submission—relate to the opening and closing of containers, or to the consumption and dispensation of their contents? The question was never broached, and has since rarely been raised by art historians, but it is precisely the kind of question that a student of "material culture" is most likely to ask.

Art, Material Culture, and Social Scale

In a discussion of Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals as "material media," Irene Winter (2000) recalls an exhibition titled "Bas-reliefs imaginaires" curated by Pierre Amiet in 1973 at the Hôtel de la Monnaie in Paris, which featured "enormous, free standing photographic blow-ups" of the (modern) impressions made from ancient seals. According to Amiet, as reported by Winter, these "minuscule monuments"—capable of being held in the hand—represent the range of Mesopotamian artistic tradition more fully than the surviving corpus of "major arts" from that region. The exhibition's intended effect was to showcase the "sculptural richness" of miniature seal-carving by

elevating it to the scale of monumental art, measuring up to the famous limestone relief panels that ornamented the walls of Neo-Assyrian palaces.

Winter observes that this elision of scale disguises important “variables of function, audience and social context” that have a bearing on the interpretation of images. Images, she points out, “have an active relationship with other images, not just with the textual sources of their own imagery” (2000: 77). Her approach can, I suggest, be taken further, to consider not only relationships *among images* but also between images and the physical *objects*—whether containers, documents, or doorways—to which they were attached, via their clay sealings. Reintroducing the object in this way adds a further dimension to the analysis of seal imagery as “material media,” raising the issue of how images entered through their material attachments into the conduct of social transactions.

For example, it has often been observed that imagery distributed via the medium of cylinder seals includes depictions of supernatural figures with known protective or apotropaic qualities. Less often remarked upon is the iterative function of such imagery, which extends the physical act of protecting a container or doorway (or, more precisely, its contents) by tying or locking it shut and placing a sealing across it. “Protection” here takes the form of an image that works—partly because of its material location on a closure or threshold—like a “thought trap” (*sensu* Gell 1998), involving the opener of a container (or doorway) in a potentially complex chain of relationships with the owner of the seal (who may be physically absent) and the agencies represented on its surface (which may be of a superhuman or otherwise portentous kind).

In the ancient Near East this aspect of seal use is likely to have played an important role in the early development of urban life.¹ To clarify this role it is necessary to consider the function of seal imagery in relation to wider changes in the scale of social and economic relations, and also in material culture, including containers and their contents. The changes I have in mind are evident in Mesopotamia from the fourth millennium BCE onwards, and can be subsequently traced (in various permutations) across a significant part of Bronze Age Eurasia, from the lands east of the Caspian Sea to those bordering the Aegean Sea. While their local manifestations cannot be described here in any detail, a brief outline of the main trends can be sketched.

One such change concerns relationships among producers and consumers of material goods. In large-scale economies the sources of everyday comestibles would have become mysterious (and subject to mystification) in ways that are unlikely to occur in smaller, face-to-face societies. New elements of risk would have entered into transactions formerly conducted on the basis of personal trust and familiarity. Furthermore, the nature of food and drink was itself transformed during the transition to urban life, notably through the increasing availability of dairy products and alcoholic beverages, the

distribution of which may have been linked to calendric rituals and other ceremonial occasions (Joffe 1998; Sherratt 2004). Such goods could be made to varying grades and strengths, and could become dangerous when contaminated or overexposed. The containers in which perishable goods were stored and transported also underwent important changes with the transition to urban life, including processes of standardization and simplification (Potts 1997: 138–63).

Viewed against this wider backdrop, the use of seals to secure goods taken into the body and household seems likely to have served a complex variety of roles—at once practical, social, and psychological. This combination of roles is not easily subsumed within our established categories of “art” and “material culture.” It may be central to understanding why seal imagery so often projects the dominant cosmological and political principles of its day. Through their practical association with the safeguarding of goods, sealing devices offered evidence of elite claims to secure the basic materials of life and well-being, at the same time creating extended webs of accountability between centralized economic institutions and their dependents. At once bureaucratic and apotropaic, they were, in short, a core visual technology of urban life in the western Old World, supremely adapted to the intense fusion of moral and administrative activities that characterized the temple and palace estates of the Bronze Age.

The “Bureaucratic Eye”

Another area where it may be useful to think across the categories of “art” and “material culture” is figuration: the formal and technological principles according to which bodies are depicted. This applies equally to the depiction of human bodies, the bodies of animals or plants, and composite forms that combine elements from different species. For art historians, the notion that figuration is influenced by habits (cognitive and motor) developed in other areas of cultural life is closely associated with Michael Baxandall’s celebrated notion of the “period eye,” which he developed through a study of paintings produced in the mercantile city-states of Renaissance Italy. Writing of the relationship between commercial techniques and practices of depiction, Baxandall (1972: 86–101)—as recently discussed by Jeremy Tanner—observed that in a world before standard containers,

the flow of commerce was heavily dependent on the ability of parties to a transaction swiftly and reliably to calculate the volumes contained in particular containers. This they achieved through skills they had acquired in breaking down complex shapes into combinations of more simple geometric forms, reliably estimating their proportions, and on that basis establishing the quantity of a material being offered for exchange. The

same skills were of use to painters in composing paintings, whether designing complex pictorial figures, or creating a coherent perspectival space, preserving the proper ratios between the volumes of comparable bodies depicted at different virtual depths in the pictorial field. The mathematics and geometry which underpinned these skills were learned by both painters and commodity traders in the secondary school or “abbaco.”

(Tanner 2010: 234–35)

Disparities in the scope and nature of documentary evidence for fifteenth-century Italy and the ancient Near East might seem reason enough to avoid such an analysis. In this context, it is notable that the literature on Mesopotamian materials and industries (e.g., Moorey 1994; Potts 1997) has remained largely distinct, both in method and source material, from studies of Mesopotamian aesthetics (e.g., Winter 1995). The potential to explore relationships across these domains is nevertheless highlighted by recent work on the intersection of calculus, commerce, and ornamental—largely non-figural—design. Eleanor Robson (2008: 45–50), for instance, points out that the decoration of luxury items, such as an inlaid box from the Royal Tombs of Ur (ca. 2500 BCE) (Figure 2.2), exemplifies principles of mathematical reasoning that are explicitly formulated in didactic cuneiform texts of the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BCE).



Figure 2.2 Gaming board inlaid with symmetrical designs. Ur, Royal Cemetery; Early Dynastic IIIa (ca. 2550–2400 BCE). Shell, red limestone, and lapis lazuli; 30.1 × 11 × 2.4 cm. British Museum ME 120834.

© The Trustees of the British Museum.

In this specific case, lack of contemporaneity between these very different kinds of sources poses an obstacle to analysis; but Robson’s basic point is broader. As with Baxandall’s study of Renaissance Italy—my comparison rather than hers—Robson recognizes the likely importance of an urban, elite

(or perhaps sub-elite) institutional context in ensuring the transfer of cognitive habits and skills between individuals and across cultural domains. Her postulate that “the ancient practitioners and authors of mathematics had a world view that was not radically different from that of other Mesopotamian scribes and artisans” may be difficult to substantiate. As she notes, however, it is “defensible on the grounds of the all-pervasiveness of numeracy in cuneiform culture: as we have already seen, most scribes were trained in methods of quantitative documentation and control, which they used for the large majority of their working lives” (Robson 2008: 45).²

Might a similar approach—working between the domains of visual cognition, literacy, and practical reason—be extended to an analysis of Mesopotamian figural imagery? In his entry on the topic of *Mischwesen* for the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, Frans Wiggermann makes an intriguing (if problematic) observation that suggests a point of departure. Writing about the prominence of composite figures in ancient Near Eastern art, he suggests that

it is only regular artistic activity that can be made responsible for the creation of a commonly known and accepted religious art, the only channel through which the novelty of monster form could spread and take hold on public imagination. Art needs monsters and monsters need art, which implies that monsters in general cannot be older than the first recognizable art styles (Late Uruk period), and more specifically, that first attestations cannot be very far removed from invention.

(Wiggermann 1993–97: 225)

The assertion that “art styles,” however defined, cannot be recognized before the beginnings of urban life in the Near East is puzzling; consider, for example, the extensive distributions of painted pottery styles among Late Neolithic village societies. Leaving this to one side, we can focus instead on the more promising observation that composite figures—with bodies assembled from the clearly differentiated and contrasting parts of multiple species—become markedly more common as subjects for depiction in Mesopotamia with the growth of cities in the fourth millennium BCE, and remain so thereafter.³

Some of the better known examples of composite figuration in Mesopotamian art include the snake-necked lions on Late Uruk cylinder seals, the ubiquitous bull- and scorpion-men of the Early Dynastic period (see Frankfort [1954] 1996: *passim*; Hansen 1987), the protective images (terracotta figurines or moldmade plaques) used in domestic ritual from Old Babylonian times onward (Moorey 1975; Rittig 1977), the lion-headed genii and griffin demons (*ugallu* and *apkallu*) of Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs (Ornan 2004), and the demonic figure of Lamashtu (Tourtet 2010). Despite their diverse ritual functions and cosmological associations, all can be seen as variations on a particular kind of anatomical experiment, taking place in the visual domain.

The essence of the experiment lay in isolating the limbs or other features of diverse species and recombining them to form images of beings that have no counterparts in the visible world.

In his commentary to the recent exhibition “La fabrique des images,” Philippe Descola (2010) points out that visual experiments of this kind have been cultivated in many but by no means all societies. It may be significant that his examples of composite figuration derive overwhelmingly from urban kingdoms or empires (i.e., relatively large-scale societies such as those of Aztec Mexico, medieval Europe, nineteenth-century Benin, or Sri Lanka) as opposed to the relatively small-scale societies (e.g., Australian and circumpolar tribes) whose art occupies a major part of the exhibition, but this is not a point that Descola pursues. His analysis of image-making is global but resolutely unhistorical. The ancient Near East offers an opportunity to consider how composite figuration in art might arise *historically* from broader modes of reasoning, exemplified by a wider range of material culture and written sources (further explored in Wengrow 2014).

This endeavor calls for a slightly closer definition of the perceptual and motor procedures required for the effective execution of composite figures. As Descola observes, it is precisely because of their fictive character that the production of visually compelling composites demands enhanced accuracy in the depiction of individual body parts. Each must be rendered at a common scale and clearly identifiable, in and of itself, as belonging to a species of a certain kind. Only then can the resulting compound figure retain a basic coherence on the anatomical plane, allowing even present-day viewers to infer its (often extraordinary) properties of movement and vitality. Barbara Stafford (2007: 45–65) refers to such figures as “compressive compositions” that conjure organic-seeming wholes from “individualistic, competing, and fissionable parts.”

Composite figuration might then be associated, historically and logically, with a variety of more general cultural traits such as the tendency toward standardization in cultural form, toward modularity in manufacturing techniques, and toward modes of information management that break the organic world down into a series of fixed and interchangeable subunits. Following and adapting Baxandall, I want to propose a new term—the “bureaucratic eye”—for this particular way of seeing and engaging with the world. Anyone who has come under its petrifying and disorienting gaze will immediately recognize the authority of the bureaucratic eye, which confronts the world, not as we ordinarily encounter and perceive it—a world made up of unique and sentient totalities—but instead as an imaginary realm of divisible subjects, each comprising a multitude of separable, standard, and recombinable parts.

Principles of just this sort lie behind the invention and early development of the cuneiform script in southern Mesopotamia during the late fourth

millennium BCE. Designed for bookkeeping purposes, the script notates a wide range of subjects (materials, animals, plants, and human labor) as divisible into fixed subclasses and units of measurement. In order for it to function as an effective tool of bureaucracy, every named commodity—each beer or oil jar, each dairy container, each animal of the herd, and each human subject—had to be notionally interchangeable with every other of the same administrative class. Like all bureaucratic systems it was therefore based on a working fiction of cultural uniformity that (despite its ultimately unreal nature) steered cultural production in a certain direction.

That direction is apparent not only in everyday material culture—such as mudbricks and commodity jars, which began to appear in rigidly standardized and often modular forms—but also in pictorial art. Concurrent with early script development, new standards of anatomical precision and uniformity become evident in the depiction of human and animal subjects, both in miniature and monumental formats (Brandes 1979, 1986). Through the functional medium of cylinder seals, small-scale depiction remained closely tied to the practice of literate economic administration, which required the multiplication of clearly distinguishable signs for the official marking of commodities and documents. Variability among seal designs was generated through often tiny adjustments in the form or arrangement of figures and motifs, which did not alter the overall visual statement, but allowed the seal to fulfill its role as a discrete identifier within the larger administrative system to which it belonged (Nissen 1977).

The invention of a new repertory of imaginary composite figures fits quite logically into this urban context of centralized industry and administration, forming a visual counterpart to the kind of “fanciful paradigmatic name-generating exercises” (Englund 1998: 171–72) found in some of the earliest scribal (lexical) lists (Figure 2.3). It becomes possible to see how, in its search for new subject matter, the “bureaucratic eye” would have been drawn to the possibilities of composite figuration, which foregrounds details of anatomy that would normally slip by our visual attention (Stafford 2007: 45) and greatly multiplies the range of possible subjects for depiction. Not just ornamental or geometric, but also figurative art might then be linked to more general modes of reasoning that were cultivated in urban centers, arising from within an administrative milieu.⁴

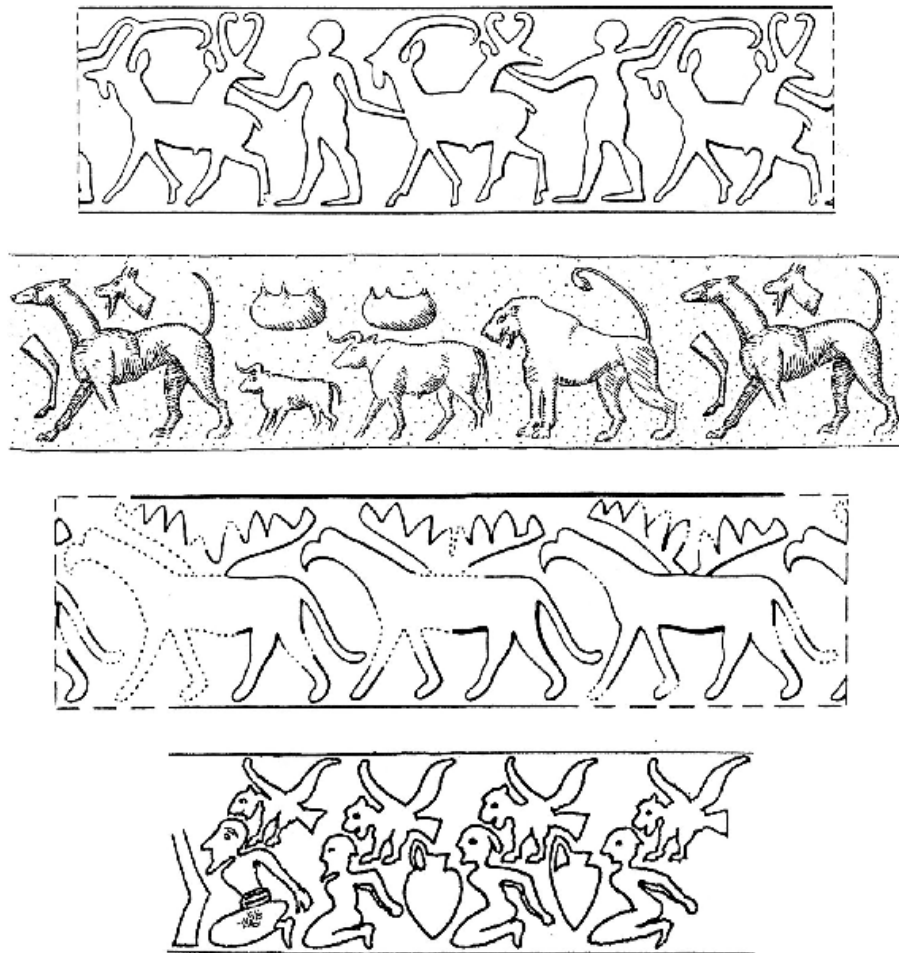


Figure 2.3 Line drawings of cylinder seal impressions showing experiments with composite figuration. Mesopotamia and western Iran; late fourth millennium BCE, Uruk.

From R. M. Boehmer, *Uruk: Früheste Siegelabrollungen* (Mainz: von Zabern, 1999). Reproduced with permission of the Orient Department, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut.

Image, Commerce, and Cosmology

A third and final area that I wish to consider is that of “exotic materials.” Here, once again, a conceptual dichotomy between art and material culture, and between art historical and archaeological interpretations, is clear and obvious. While researchers working in both traditions have acknowledged the centrality of exotic materials (and hence long-distance trade) to Mesopotamian civilization, they have done so in markedly different ways, and

often with little direct reference to one another's work.

There is, for example, a considerable body of research on the cosmological associations and aesthetic significance of exotic materials in Mesopotamian literature, where imported stones and metals are routinely mentioned and celebrated as the “stuff” from which exalted bodies and structures—both royal and divine—are made (Winter 1995; 1999, with further references). So prominent is the literary focus on lapis lazuli, gold, silver, fine timber, incense, and other exotic materials that these can reasonably be said to constitute the very substance of divine or royal presence, just as their loss (whether through looting, as in Sumerian “Lamentation Texts” [Michalowski 1988], or through divine misadventure, as in the tale of Inana's descent to the Underworld [Black et al. 2004: 65–76]) is described not simply as a material deficit, but with a sense of moral abandonment—as though the materials carried away with them the very blessings and protection afforded by positive relations with the gods.

Another body of research looks closely at empirical distributions of raw materials in the archaeological record, and uses the methods of physical science and geology to reconstruct the past movement of materials across the Mesopotamian landscape and beyond. Research of this kind has been central to the development of a materialist explanation for the pristine emergence of urban life in this region, which draws heavily upon theoretical models inspired by global political economy and the historical sociology of capitalism (e.g., Algaze 2008). The main thrust of this approach is to emphasize the material deprivation of urban, floodplain societies and the kind of predatory economics that result when local agrarian surplus is harnessed to the acquisition of minerals, metals, fine timber, etc., from surrounding highland and coastal regions.

The basic premise was neatly laid out some decades ago by Kajsa Ekholm and Jonathan Friedman (1979: 43). “To insist, as is usually done, that the evolution of high cultures is based on the agricultural surplus of intensive irrigation is to systematically avoid the problem that surplus grain cannot be locally transformed into bronze, cloth, palaces (of imported stone), fine jewelry and weapons—hallmarks of the great civilization.” On this model, the drive toward economic centralization in “core” areas of urban growth derives from a need to coordinate economic surplus for conversion into value-added goods (e.g., alcoholic drinks, textiles) that can be traded to small-scale societies located in “peripheral” areas (or to middlemen with access to such areas) in return for a regular supply of exotic raw materials. The *deus ex machina* of this process is assumed to be an urban elite whose members are acutely aware of the strategic importance of “exotica” for reproducing their own social dominance, and pursue them with tenacity.

What materialist models often fail to account for is the specificity of the materials themselves; that is, why it is only particular substances that are

traded over long distances, and why certain kinds of materials remain sought after over extremely long periods of time—centuries, or even millennia—in ways that seem to reflect something more than the cupidity of particular status groups. It is precisely the longevity of this cultural attachment to specific kinds of fragrant resins, shiny woods, colored stones, and certain types of metals that allows art historians to reconstruct something along the lines of a distinctly Mesopotamian “aesthetic” that can be indirectly documented in the cuneiform record over a period of thousands of years (Winter 1995).

The two approaches I have outlined are complementary. Combining them may provide a richer and more compelling picture of “Bronze Age economics” than has been available so far. To illustrate this point I will focus, in the last part of this chapter, on some aspects of the treatment of Mesopotamian cult statues (see also Wengrow 2010: 109–24). Statues of the divine cult were the central focus of temple ritual in the ancient Near East. They were the primary medium through which mortals approached the gods and, in doing so, affirmed their sense of locality and belonging. But, as will become clear, cult statues—the earthly bodies of the gods—were made of materials and nourished with substances that were exotic to the lowland centers of Mesopotamian civilization. While the actual quantities of imported goods employed in their manufacture represent only a tiny fraction of what was routinely traded over long distances, cult images therefore provide a privileged point of entry to the relationship between commodities and the sacred in the ancient Near East.

Cult Images and the Mixture of Materials

Ritual application of exotic materials to anthropomorphic figures has an extremely long history in southwest Asia. It antedates the emergence of cities, and can be traced back at least to the beginnings of sedentary life. Pigments and shells brought from distant highlands and coasts were applied to the plastered skulls of deceased individuals in Neolithic settlements of the ninth millennium BCE, as documented at lowland village sites from the Jordan Valley to central Turkey (Kuijt 2008). Such practices provided an established ritual framework into which other types of foreign substance (e.g., the dark, volcanic glass obsidian) could be introduced as novel ways of materializing the ontological distance between mortals, ancestors, and gods.

An attempt could be made to trace the dynamic relationship between local ritual and trans-local trade, focused on an evolving repertory of anthropomorphic figures and their changing modes of ornamentation, from prehistory to the time of the first cities and empires. A study of that kind is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but it should be noted that materials such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, gold, and silver were already available to village

societies in the Mesopotamian lowlands centuries before the inception of urban life; and a striking assemblage of imported goods recovered from burials at Tepe Gawra in northern Iraq suggests their use in the making of anthropomorphic statuary no later than the end of the fifth millennium BCE (Late Ubaid period) (Rothman 2002).

Cuneiform documents from much later periods describe in detail the manufacture, appearance, and ritual animation of divine images for Mesopotamian temple cults (Dick 1999). Dating mainly to the first millennium BCE, they are thought to preserve a tradition of image-making that extends back to much earlier times—a point that is difficult to substantiate, as statues of the divine cult rarely survive in the archaeological record owing to their perishable or recyclable materials of manufacture (fine woods and fabrics, metals, and precious stones) (Spycket 1968, 1981). Even the more durable stone figures used in temple cult—most likely as surrogates for human supplicants, rather than for their divine benefactors—were often assembled from interchangeable components, as if to anticipate their fragmentation and recombination in another form (Evans 2012: 137–40) (Figure 2.4). Their surface coverings and inlays were no doubt recycled in a similar fashion.



Figure 2.4 Composite construction of Early Dynastic stone statues. Nippur, Inana Temple, level VII B. Left to right: Iraq Museum IM 66164, IM 66183; Oriental Institute Museum A31494.

Courtesy of the Nippur Publication Project (7 N 162, 7 N 205, 7 N 181).

Nonetheless, from the surviving literary sources a consistent picture emerges

of the ontological status of divine cult statues in the ancient Near East. Statues intended for the cult of the gods were highly sophisticated craft products, the pinnacle of skilled labor conducted in temple and palace workshops. But as the outcome merely of human technology they were incapable of fulfilling their designated ritual functions. Once removed from the workshop, the statue (still in a polluted state and unable to receive offerings) was taken to a separate location where rites of purification were performed upon it, animating it and rendering it suitable for installation within the temple. These rituals included incantations that granted the cult image a new point of origin, a “birth” outside the domain of ordinary human activity, following which (and perhaps imitating the treatment of a newborn child) it was immediately washed and surrounded with cleansing liquids and fragrances (Walker and Dick 2001).

Ritual incantations to be performed around the cult statue narrate its assembly from “pure” materials, qualitatively distinct from those of which commodities are made (Hurowitz 2006). Substances comprising its skin, flesh, bones, and hair are said to arise directly into the figure from sources beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. They are described as unworked by human hands, transcending those properties of number that make profane goods subject to ordinary principles of quantification. Metals, stones, and timbers that go into the image are exalted as creations of mountains whose peaks pierce the heavens, and of trees whose roots penetrate the crust of the earth. They are counted only in mystical units of number, charged with esoteric meanings, or in volumes that exceed the range of the possible; and their time of birth is the deep time of cosmic creation. To treat the cult image as a subject of human technology, or reduce its materials to the status of commodities, is quite simply to end its “life.”

Here, perhaps, lies the most intriguing paradox of the divine cult image in the ancient Near East, since the materials required for its manufacture were *precisely* those which sustained, and were the ardent focus of, commercial transactions—metals, used as standard currency, precious stones, and timber traded over great distances via multiple (human) intermediaries. As the anthropologist Maurice Godelier points out, contradictions of this sort often underpin the fragile relationship between commodities and sacred objects, things made to circulate and things made to be withheld from circulation:

It should come as no surprise that, in many societies and cultures, gold and silver have been used as money. These are metals which, over the centuries, have been used to adorn the bodies of the gods and the men (and women) in positions of power, and which were of no use in daily life ... A money must harbor the presence of the gods.

(Godelier 1999: 166)

The boundary separating commodities from sacred objects (in some ways like

that between “material culture” and “art”) is not defined by the use of distinct materials in trade and in ritual. Instead it is maintained through contrasting sets of moral norms and practices that cause the *same* materials to circulate within different spheres of exchange: opportunistic and acquisitive, on the one hand, ceremonial and sacrificial on the other. It is in the process of controlling the flow of these particular materials that the parallel worlds of sacred and profane are constituted and kept apart.

In further characterizing the relationship between cult statues and commodities, it is useful to consider the distance between mortals and gods, and the role of exotic materials in bridging that distance. Mesopotamian cosmogonies are preserved mainly in cuneiform compositions dating to the early second millennium BCE or to later periods. They share certain basic premises concerning human and divine bodies that undoubtedly rest on older foundations. Typically these narratives commence with the primeval gods who personify elemental forces: sky, air, fluvial mud, and water (both fresh and salt). It was the gods who dug out the beds of the great rivers at the dawn of time, and maintained canals to irrigate the marshes and nourish themselves. To lighten this burden they procreated, making lesser gods to labor in their stead. The latter in turn rebelled and their noisy objections provided the context in which human beings were created to “bear the load of the gods,” and to supply them with offerings of food and drink (Dalley 2000).

According to Mesopotamian mythology these first people were shaped from a specific mixture of substances. The gods slew one of their own kind and, mixing his flesh and blood with clay, created the raw material from which mortal bodies were fashioned. It is this mixing of substances that initiates both the provisioning of the gods by humans and the construction of their earthly dwellings, made from the same distinct blend of materials. Feeding the gods is thereby placed at the very center of human existence, as its literal *raison d'être*. The designated food of the gods, like the statue bodies through which they received it, could only be secured through long-range trade. As ritual texts make clear, local products would not suffice to attract the gods to inhabit their earthly dwellings, which were themselves adorned with imported materials such as lapis lazuli and gold. To offerings of meat, bread, and beer were necessarily added fragrant incense, the wood and sap of odoriferous trees extracted from sources far beyond the alluvial plains of the Tigris and Euphrates (Oppenheim 1977: 183–97; Bottéro 2004).

The cosmological underpinnings of long-distance trade in Mesopotamian civilization serve once again to complicate the modern analytical distinction between “art” and “material culture.” While clearly not all long-range transactions were charged with spiritual purpose, neither were they simply the outcome of millennia-long strategies for securing access to “luxuries” or “prestige goods.” Terms such as “luxury” and “exotica,” as we conventionally use them, are defined in opposition to the materials and artifacts of everyday

life. It is clear, however, that in the ancient Near East exotic materials were—among other things—a means of transforming and enhancing everyday, local substances through a process of admixture and blending which changed the very nature of those substances, rendering them suitable for inclusion in the manufacture of images. To interpret the image without regard for its constituent materials may therefore presuppose a distinction between matter and meaning that is at odds with the nature of the evidence.

Conclusion

In drawing this discussion of art and material culture to a close, it is the latter point—about materials used in the making of ritually effective objects—on which I wish to focus. Cuneiform sources suggest that even the most elemental and abundant of local substances could be sanctified for the express purpose of producing such an image or structure. Commenting on a ritual to be performed at the founding of a new temple, Victor Hurowitz notes how figurines of the goddess Ninshubur required for the ceremony

were to be of clay prepared in a brief ritual consisting of sacrifice, prayer, and gesture. Three days before founding the temple, the ritualist was to go to the clay pit. He was to take lapis lazuli, mix together roasted flour and emmer beer, throw them into the pit and say: “Clay pit! Take your purchase price. Three days from now I will make a Ninšubur figure out of your clay.” ... Dedicating the clay is accomplished by purchasing the clay from the pit and announcing that it will be used for making a god. The figurine is thus not of ordinary, profane clay, but of ritually dedicated/sacred clay.

(Hurowitz 2006: 15)

The ritual use of exotic materials to fortify more basic materials of construction finds corroboration in the archaeological record, notably in the foundation deposits of temples (Ellis 1968). Reporting on his fieldwork in the Diyala Valley, Henri Frankfort noted how the foundations of ancient Mesopotamian temples were laid upon raised platforms filled with clean sand so as “to accentuate the structure, and mark out its sacred site as distinct from the profane soil which is subject to the accidents of daily life, being tilled at one time, made to accommodate a dwelling at another, transformed into a cemetery at yet another period” (in Delougaz and Lloyd 1942: 311). But sand itself, however pure, was not enough to achieve this outcome. Carefully placed within the corners of these platforms, embedded in the sand, Frankfort’s team discovered small pieces of gold, copper, lapis lazuli, and other materials originating from far outside the Mesopotamian lowlands:

materials that were no doubt once the object of calculated acquisitive strategies, but that also possessed a cultural significance—as pathways to the sacred—that must, in itself, have seemed beyond negotiation.

To our eyes “exotic” because of their remote geographical sources, such materials were arguably a necessary precondition for feeling “at home” within the Mesopotamian landscape. They restored to the land and its native materials a potential for sanctity, blessing, and renewal that could never be permanently realized, but that often found durable expression in the making of what Frankfort himself ([1954] 1996) went on to describe as the “art and architecture of the ancient Near East.”

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Evans 2012 offers numerous insights into the institutional context of image production in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia, and also reflects upon contemporary distinctions between “art” and “material culture.” Moorey 2001 surveys archaeological and written evidence for the institutional contexts of craft production, and for the mobility of artists and artisans. Winter 2003 provides a guide to some ancient Near Eastern written sources relating to the appreciation of highly crafted objects and images. Robson 2008 considers the relationship between visual cognition and mathematics in ancient Mesopotamia.

Essays in Uehlinger 2000 discuss ancient Near Eastern images as material media, with a focus on the Iron Age. Wengrow 2014 provides more extensive discussion of the mechanical reproduction of images, and also the relationship between bureaucracy and figuration; and for further consideration of the relationships between commerce, cosmology, and the making of cult images, see Wengrow 2010.

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NOTES

- 1 The absence of similar sealing devices from other early centers of urban life, such as the cities of Shang China, suggests that they were not universally necessary for the growth of large-scale economies and population centers. The mechanical application of images to the closures of commodity vessels and other items should instead be considered part of the distinctive culture of bureaucracy that developed in western Eurasia during the Bronze Age, where its deep roots lie in the pre-urban societies of the later Neolithic period (von Wickede 1990).
- 2 The argument may be indirectly reinforced by experimental research, which demonstrates a shared computational basis for mathematical learning and spatial cognition in the neural circuitry of the human brain (Hubbard et al. 2005).

- 3 This point has been noted by others before (e.g., Groenewegen-Frankfort 1955; Porada 1987), but has only recently been made the topic of a focused study (Wengrow 2014). My thanks to Karen Sonik and Claudia Suter for making Groenewegen-Frankfort's unpublished manuscript available to me.
- 4 Much later cuneiform texts, dating to the first millennium BCE, describe in detail the manufacture of composite figures for protective (magical) purposes according to set procedures (Nakamura 2004; Nakamura, this volume). Neo-Assyrian composites came in standard sets and assemblages, and the texts give precise instructions as to their appearance and proper locations around the house. Every detail of manufacture was clearly set down: the various components of the body (including model wings, horns, and incised scales); its outer treatment with colored pastes; the written incantations to be inscribed on its surface; the weapons and instruments of purification that it was to carry; to which hand each should be attached; and in what order all these acts were to be carried out. The production of such figures clearly belonged to a highly structured, ritualized, and restricted genre of image-making, the roots of which may extend back to the beginnings of literate bureaucracy in the late fourth millennium BCE (Wiggermann 1992).

CHAPTER THREE

Meaning and Interpretation

Astrid Nunn

Introduction

In the late 1930s, archaeologist Nelson Glueck excavated a terracotta figurine representing a “Mother Goddess” in a house at Tell el-Kheleifeh near Aqaba, Jordan. Although this object has never been published, we can imagine its likely appearance. To Glueck (1940: 16), this female figurine was “of a conspicuous crudeness, and startlingly ugly.” Whereas today such an “appreciation” might evoke a smile (or a frown), in Glueck’s era it was perfectly permissible. What has changed?

Meaning and interpretation are subject to change. Ways of approaching and interpreting objects depend on the prejudices and insights of any given era, as does the object of investigation itself. Meaning and interpretation concern all material both figurative and non-figurative, including architecture, everyday objects, and the find contexts themselves. Our focus here, however, is on the category of objects often labeled as “art”—a problematic term for many scholars of the ancient Near East, which this volume, as a whole, addresses.

This chapter considers selected issues in understanding and interpreting objects that are either themselves images (statues and terracotta figurines, for example) or that bear an image (such as carved reliefs and seals), with special emphasis on Mesopotamia. I review some of the broader intellectual trends in interpreting the past and its material remains that have been influential in studies devoted to the ancient Near Eastern field. Several examples illustrate how these approaches have been applied to groups of images or objects that pose especially challenging problems of interpretation. Particularly in recent decades, theoretical and methodological approaches developed in the disciplines of history, anthropology, archaeology, and art history have profoundly shaped the study and interpretation of ancient Near Eastern visual and material culture.

New Perspectives from Anthropology and History

By the early modern period, at the latest, scholars had developed multiple theories and methods directed toward interpreting ancient civilizations

(literature in Trigger 2006; Bentley, Maschner, and Chippindale 2008). The discovery of the New World, complemented in the nineteenth century by numerous ethnographic expeditions to America, Africa, and Asia, provided the initial impulse to broaden interest in non-European art and relativize the criteria governing “quality.” While the newly discovered “alien” cultures were initially stamped as “primitive,” they gave a crucial stimulus to studying the origins of human cultures, including those of Europe. Gradually, and at first primarily within artistic circles, Europeans sought to consider the value of a foreign culture in itself rather than by comparison with their own. Exclusive interest in European art began to diminish with the new appreciation for East Asian and later African art, which influenced almost every major Western art movement between 1880 and World War II. The newly discovered cultures prompted important questions: What are the criteria for judging quality? How do we assess “works of art” that to us are inferior?

It is customary to recognize Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) as a foundational figure in the study of Mediterranean antiquity, who established a canon of Greek sculpture and a highly influential evolutionary sequence of styles (Winckelmann 1764). The Austrian scholar Alois Riegl departed from these prevailing models of artistic development and organic or cyclical sequences. In *Die spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901–23), Riegl recognized that the aesthetic ideals of late antiquity and the era of the barbarian invasions (400–800 CE) differed from those of classical antiquity. Rather than representing a decline from classical ideals, however, he saw them as the logical unfolding of the cultural or social *Kunstwollen* (will to form). This perspective does not contend that it is impossible to distinguish good from bad works of art, but rather that the quality of a work of art should be considered within a given cultural context as an expression of *Kunstwollen*. Like the Western art movements that embraced “primitive” or non-Western art, Riegl’s interest in late antiquity and in the decorative arts of cultures worldwide reflected a new appreciation for artistic traditions outside the classical ideal. A later product of this approach—and a landmark in its own right—was André Malraux’s *Le musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* (1947), which assembled in an imaginary museum the “best” art of all times and places. In his preface to André Parrot’s (1960) survey of Sumerian art, Malraux juxtaposed a statue of Gudea, ruler of Lagash (ca. 2100 BCE), with a work by the twentieth-century Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi. Until the 1950s, however, art historical scholarship largely maintained as its reference the classical Greek canon. Working chiefly from written sources, the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger (1926, 1976) pleaded for an approach to understanding Near Eastern cultures according to their own principles and concepts—*Eigenbegrifflichkeit*, or “conceptual autonomy”—rather than by comparative criteria.

Global approaches to ancient societies received a decisive stimulus from the

school of historical thought associated with the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. Understanding history as “the science of a change,” this perspective promoted the study of mentalities, seeking to recover “the movement of life” and the overarching cohesiveness of an era. Particular events are less important than the broader developments in which they took place (Burgière 2009). Perhaps the best known of the Annales historians is Fernand Braudel, who endeavored to reconstruct the dynamic relationship between the human and natural environments, and to consider the results from both short- and long-term perspectives. His first and most famous work, *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949), documented the Mediterranean's global reach in the sixteenth century. Although predominantly a school of historians, the Annales perspective influenced a wide range of social and humanistic sciences, and its scope extended to ancient Near Eastern history and material culture (Cassin 1960, for example). A few studies treating the ancient Near East and Mesopotamia have been explicitly grounded in this approach (Knapp 1992, 1993).

Although these methods and perspectives were developed primarily with reference to ancient civilizations worldwide or to western Europe in the modern era, they significantly influenced the study of ancient Near Eastern cultures. Perhaps the youngest of all archaeologies, Mesopotamian archaeology was virtually inundated with new information following the resumption of fieldwork after the two World Wars. An era of establishing guidelines for chronology and style lasted approximately until 1950 (Parrot 1946–53). Chronologies and handbooks, whose chief priority was to collect and organize the material, characterize the decades from around 1940 to 1985. Interpretation was not completely absent, however. In the 1950s and 1960s some interpreters of Mesopotamian art proceeded in a rather free and undisciplined fashion, as theoretical and methodical background was scant (see below). But this development should be seen within the context of a nascent archaeology.

It is tempting to say that there is currently no single “school” in the study of Near Eastern antiquity, but rather a collection of individual scholarly approaches. Broader trends in anthropology, literary theory, sociology, and philosophy, however, have profoundly influenced current studies of ancient Near Eastern visual and material culture and its interpretation. Examples include gender studies, poststructuralism, and object agency.

The Methods of Art History and the Ancient Near East

Although before 1950 most studies devoted to ancient Near Eastern material

offered no explicit theoretical underpinning for their methodology, they nevertheless loosely followed the general principles of art history as shaped by a few “founding fathers,” who developed their methods at the beginning of the twentieth century and whose influence remains significant (Preziosi 2009). The so-called philological method was developed primarily in Germany, in response to Winckelmann’s subjective approach. It demands a detailed inspection of the formal properties of the works themselves according to clearly formulated questions, in conjunction with an analysis of written sources. From this perspective, works of art are considered scientific objects. For the philologists, everything was of interest—with the rather considerable exception of the artistic imagination itself. In the pre–World War I era also appeared the earliest manuals and encyclopedias treating the ancient Near East together with Egyptian and Mediterranean antiquity (Perrot and Chipiez 1882–1914). The first volume of the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* (later *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*), a magisterial encyclopedia devoted to the ancient Near East, was published in Leipzig in 1928 and the final one in 2018.

Around 1900 a new generation began to react against the “catalogues raisonnés,” which despite their utility were perceived as an obstacle to understanding art as a product of the human imagination and thereby embracing aesthetics, spirit, and an inherently subjective aspect. Prompted by research into the shift in meaning of motifs between classical antiquity and the early Renaissance, the German scholar Aby Warburg (1932) developed the modern notion of iconology (derived from *iconologia*). Erwin Panofsky (1939, 1955), who met Warburg in Hamburg in 1920, refined Warburg’s approach, constructing an influential three-stage analysis intended to yield understanding of the subject of a given image. The first stage of investigation involves a *pre-iconographical description* with a technical apparatus, which should yield a basic understanding of a work, devoid of any additional cultural knowledge. The next step, *iconographical interpretation*, combines typology with the recognition of themes usually grounded in texts. The final step, *iconological interpretation*, considers the work’s entire background and analyzes its historical, religious, economical, and sociological elements. While Panofsky’s schema has often been criticized, his approach to interpreting images deserves our close attention for its profound impact on the ancient Near Eastern field (Keel 1992: 267–73; Winter 2000: 76–79; Hulster and Schmitt 2009).

Henri Frankfort (1897–1954), a key figure in Near Eastern art and archaeology who served as director of the Warburg Institute in London from 1949 to 1954, drew closely on Panofsky’s methods in his investigation of Mesopotamian images. Frankfort’s synthetic study of cylinder seals appeared in 1939, the same year as Panofsky’s classic *Studies in Iconology*. Together with the German scholar Anton Moortgat (1897–1977), Frankfort is

considered the founder of a Near Eastern archaeology “liberated” from pursuing burdensome comparisons between its artifacts and those of classical or Egyptian art and architecture, and similarly free from allusions to biblical scholarship. Frankfort was an impeccable excavator, whose emphasis on stratigraphy laid the foundations for a chronological and stylistic framework of Mesopotamian art and architecture. With his wife, Henriette Groenewegen-Frankfort, he also sought to elucidate the Mesopotamian intellectual world by including its material culture (Frankfort et al. 1946; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951).

Anton Moortgat, born in the same year as Frankfort, initiated the archaeological study of ancient Mesopotamia in Germany. Trained as a classical archaeologist, he first encountered the ancient Near East in 1923. In *Hellas und die Kunst der Achämeniden* (1926) he questioned the view that Persian art owed everything to Greek art. As early as 1930, in a study of narrative in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, and later in his *Frühe Bildkunst in Sumer* (1935), Moortgat arranged Near Eastern monuments in a chronological and stylistic sequence according to style, inscriptions, and provenance. His main focus was symbolism, which he approached through images by following their *Bildgedanken* over time and combining these with texts. Although this associative approach is now considered methodologically weak, his way of working laid the groundwork for the “art historical” branch of ancient Near Eastern archaeology, which concerns itself with stylistic classification and the meaning of imagery (Bonatz 2011: 288–91).

A comparison of these two scholars’ studies of cylinder seals is instructive. Frankfort’s *Cylinder Seals* and Moortgat’s *Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel* appeared respectively in 1939 and 1940, at the beginning of World War II, when contacts between them were impossible. Both arranged the seals according to style, taking into account their origin, their stratigraphic data (but “without relying blindly on them” [Frankfort 1939: xiv]), and their accompanying inscriptions. Later, both scholars also produced a synthetic account of Mesopotamian art intended for a broader readership (Frankfort [1954] 1996; Moortgat 1967, 1969). Each attempted to create a solid basis for classifying archaeological material. From these facts they drew, consciously or otherwise, a set of very personal conclusions with regard to intellectual issues. Both were concerned with the relationship between “reason” and “feeling.” But while Moortgat conceived of this as a struggle between the objective approach of a modern scientist and an emotional immersion in the being or nature of ancient Near Eastern cultures, Frankfort focused on the dichotomy between modern scientific and rational thought and the primitive, mythical, or mythopoeic conceptual world to which ancient Mesopotamia undoubtedly belonged (Wengrow 1999; Taylor 2011). Frankfort was guided by sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, and philosophy, whereas Moortgat focused on art history, symbolism, and *Bildgedanken*.

Initially, approaches to interpreting ancient Near Eastern imagery were thus largely grounded in art historical methods developed for western European art, and specifically for Italian Renaissance painting. In recent decades, a number of scholars have sought to deconstruct traditional, Westernizing approaches to Mesopotamian art and to understand it within its own idiom. Nearly all of these studies draw on the evidence of contemporaneous texts to help ground interpretation of images within specific cultural and historical circumstances (see, for example, pioneering investigations by Magen 1986, Gunter 1990, and Berlejung 1998. More recent contributions include Bahrani 2003, 2014; and Evans 2012).

Text and Image

From the mid-third millennium BCE onward, image and text in Mesopotamia were closely interwoven. Texts were extremely significant regardless of the degree of literacy, which was in all periods of antiquity rather limited. The interconnectedness of text and image is today an accepted and vital element in our approach to ancient civilizations in general and works of art in particular. This awareness has been present in ancient Near Eastern studies since the nineteenth century, but it has been a somewhat fine and fragile thread (Liverani 1999). With a few early exceptions (Barrelet 1974, for example), the disciplines of archaeology and philology have tended to remain fairly separate, although in recent decades commonalities have generated greater interest.

In the ancient Near East, images were created to be effective. Their efficacy could be enhanced by combining different categories of experience: image and dance, image and music, or, in a more permanent expression, image and text. Recognizing that the oldest cuneiform signs are pictograms—that is, images—may help us envision the ancient complementarity between image and text, which has become lost to us (Ross 2014). The visual expression of the image and the statement of the inscriptions are two distinct but often complementary media through which the object acquires its ontological status and its impact.

One reason for this separation is that ancient Near Eastern studies developed from biblical scholarship, where the written word is supreme. Yet it was also the rediscovery of cuneiform and hieroglyphic texts, and of ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilization, that prompted greater interest in the Bible's region of origin. This interest generated publications with translations of biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts accompanied by images of archaeological finds, of which the earliest were by Hugo Gressmann (1909). Beginning in 1950, and in several subsequent editions, James B. Pritchard (1950, 1954) published an influential anthology of “texts and pictures”

consisting of English translations of recently discovered inscriptions and archives from the ancient Near Eastern sphere. These volumes presented selections from a wide range of documents, including legal texts, literary narratives, and correspondence. The “pictures” of the title played a decidedly secondary role, consisting of monuments or decontextualized images that helped “illustrate” the various cultures represented by the Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hittite texts. The status of the pictures did not change even in the most recent edition (Pritchard 2011). In their choice of illustrations these anthologies emphasized inscribed objects, ones with figural imagery, and ones whose subjects could be closely tied to biblical, historical, or literary texts from the “cuneiform cultures.” Clearly, they also privileged historical periods over prehistoric times. And yet it was precisely in the postwar decades that archaeological investigations into prehistoric periods began to uncover unexpectedly sophisticated artifacts and buildings, and expanded the “Fertile Crescent” focus of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholarship to Turkey, Iran, and other regions.

The relationship between text and image remains a rich subject for current research, which we could broadly divide into two categories. The first type of correlation involves works that themselves bear inscriptions or captions, and objects on which image and text appear together. The second is a kind of “collage” approach that seeks to correlate separate texts and images, attempting to find written sources that fit images or images that fit texts.

The Inscribed Image

Although the cuneiform script was invented in the fourth millennium BCE, several centuries elapsed before images and text were joined. The earliest objects that combine image and text, all of which present difficulties in interpretation, probably do not predate the Early Dynastic II period (ca. 2600 BCE). They include the bird from Khafajah, the Blau Monuments (see [Figure 11.2](#) in Collins, this volume), and the “figure aux plumes,” among others (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991). From the Early Dynastic II period onward, hundreds of objects—large and small stone and metal statues, stelae, reliefs, terracotta figurines, seals, and numerous votives of various types—were furnished with an inscription (Braun-Holzinger 1991; Rohn 2011). The earliest monument on which the written name corresponds to the individual depicted is the Early Dynastic II Ushumgal Stele (Radner 2005: 115).

The unusually large number of extant statues of Gudea (ca. 2100 BCE), ruler of the Sumerian city-state of Lagash, many of them extensively inscribed (Edzard 1997), has prompted several impressive studies (see [Figure 16.2](#) in Suter, this volume). In a pioneering investigation, Irene Winter (1992)

determined that Gudea's statues were set up in pairs—one standing and one seated—in all city temples and at one other place, the **ki-a-nag** (Sumerian “place of libation”), dedicated to the deceased king, whose statues received offerings there. With Gudea as a case study in the relationship between text and image, Claudia Suter (2000) undertook a comprehensive analysis of textual and archaeological evidence, including statues, stelae, foundation figurines, and cylinder seals, together with all his inscriptions. Gudea conveyed the same core message—the ruler's temple building—through visual and verbal media, which preserved separate traditions of storytelling. Presence or absence of deities, scale and gesture, space, historicity, and narrative, all express a definite relationship to the divine and human worlds. Visual accounts generally avoided events that do not happen in the “real” world, whereas written accounts were less specific and involved the divine world to a greater extent (Suter 2000: 293–94).

Another object whose inscription allowed an early identification is the terracotta mask found in Sippar, first published by Sidney Smith in 1924 (Smith 1924: 113; Black and Green 1992: 17). The features of this mask remind us of animal entrails. Exceptionally, there is a text on the reverse: “if the entrails [look like] the face of Huwawa, it is the sign of Sargon, Lord of the country.” Smith deduced that this type of face represents the demon Humbaba/Huwawa, an interpretation that is still widely accepted. The inscription dates to the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (721–705 BCE), but the terracotta itself is generally dated to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BCE).

The carved stones long known as *kudurrus* (Akkadian “boundary”) have attracted scholarly attention since the early nineteenth century, when examples reached western Europe considerably in advance of the rediscovery of Neo-Assyrian palaces and the decipherment of cuneiform (Figure 3.1; see also Figure 16.5 in Suter, this volume). Frequently fashioned as a freestanding stele, these monuments range in height from about thirty-six centimeters to one meter and were produced in Babylonia from the fourteenth to the seventh century BCE. Most are inscribed with texts recording land grants made to individuals by Babylonian kings, and carved in relief with divine symbols; a small number also bear figural scenes (see Figure 3.1). Their inscriptions reveal that in antiquity they were called not *kudurru* but *narû*, “stone monument” or “stele.” These objects present particular problems of interpretation in large measure because of their find circumstances: of approximately 160 extant examples, around 80 were removed from Babylonia to Susa in antiquity; some 60 have no certain provenance; and only about 20 were scientifically excavated. Yet the combination of text and image provides additional information about their original locations. The stones were not erected outdoors, as “boundary markers,” but instead placed in a temple, “in front of the gods,” and were often dedicated to a deity. The inscriptions

address myriad matters concerning the land in question—purchase or donation, ownership, inheritance privileges, income from land use, exemption from taxes—thus demonstrating that the stones were indeed “entitlement documents” (Slanski [2003](#)).



Figure 3.1 Entitlement document (*narû*) recording purchase of land by a royal officer, Marduk-nasir. Babylon; reign of Marduk-nadin-ahhe (eleventh century BCE). Limestone; h. 61 cm. British Museum ME 90841

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Although scholars initially assumed that the deities invoked in the texts' curse formulas would correspond to the divinities represented by the carved symbols, not a single example furnished such a direct relationship. Drawing on meticulous analysis of the symbols and reliefs on the stones, Kathryn Slanski (2003: 125–48) proposed a more nuanced relationship between text and image. In addition to the main inscription, captions placed within the carved relief field refer to divine symbols or aspects of the figural scene. The curse formulas also contain direct textual references to the imagery. The *narû*s were first “equipped” with pictures, and subsequently inscribed; sometimes the inscription was later altered, but not the image. Thus, text and imagery were coordinated in order to achieve the monument's primary function, aided by its durable material and temple setting: to guarantee the entitlement's permanence and inviolability.

The Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs perhaps most remarkably exemplify the development of connections between image and text in Mesopotamia (Russell 1999). King Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) reported on his campaigns and on the construction of his palace at Nimrud in a single text, the so-called Standard Inscription, carved as a band on his reliefs without discernible relationship to the images (Figure 3.2; see also Figure 12.3 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). Later Assyrian kings, beginning in the late eighth century BCE, experimented with other arrangements: the texts on their palace reliefs still ran in registers, but short notes or explanations, called “epigraphs,” began to appear alongside the images themselves (Gerardi 1988). The reliefs of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) introduced a radical change (Figure 3.3). Each scene was henceforth elucidated by an epigraph, whose text was as long or as short as needed. For the first time, space was left for the inscription while the relief images were being carved. Pamela Gerardi (1988) has recognized three varieties of epigraphs. One type consists of a single word or short sentence, used to identify standard war scenes such as the looting of a city. In the second type, the so-called *anāku*-epigraphs (Akkadian “I”), Assurbanipal describes war scenes in which he himself is represented. The third type, consisting of descriptive epigraphs, occurs in scenes that form parts of a larger series, such as the cycle of campaigns against Elam encompassing the battle of Til-Tuba at the Ulai River.



Figure 3.2 Bird-headed *apkallus* flanking “Assyrian sacred tree below Standard Inscription.” Nimrud, Northwest Palace; reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Gypsum; 1.11 × 1.62 m. British Museum ME 124583

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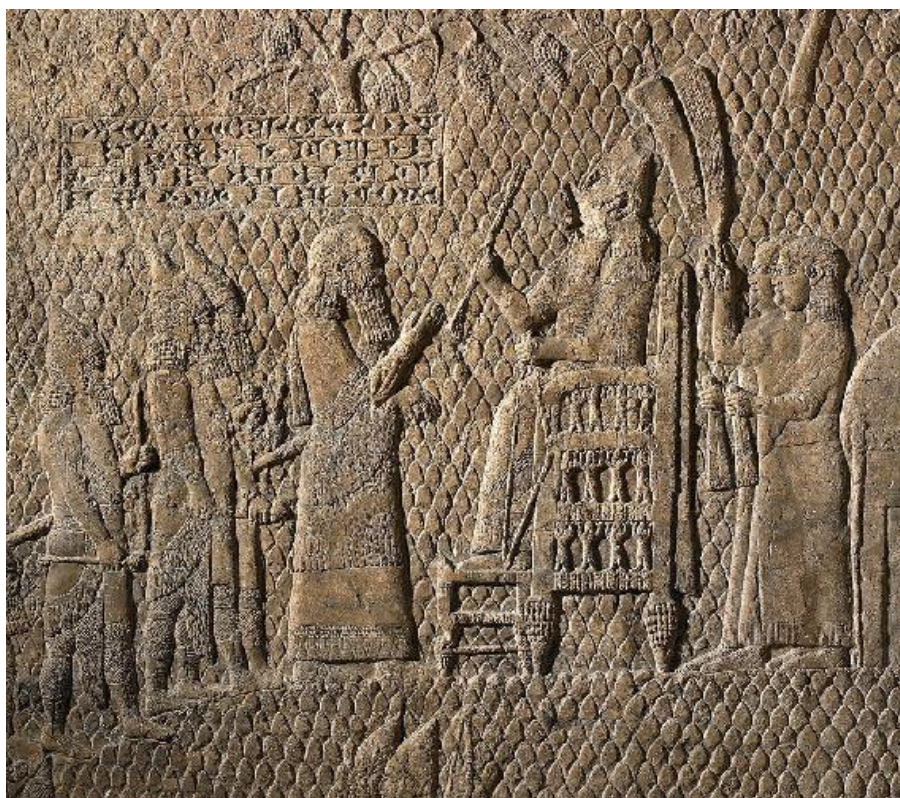


Figure 3.3 Detail, Neo-Assyrian palace relief with epigraph. Nineveh, Southwest Palace; reign of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE). Gypsum; h. entire relief 2.51 m. British Museum ME 124911

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The practice of inscribing an object with a name, which continued until Hellenistic times, allows us to identify rulers, private individuals, or demons, such as Pazuzu. In the case of seals, however, attributes or the names of deities mentioned in the accompanying inscriptions rarely provide clues to identifying the gods depicted in the seal design. In a pioneering study, E. Douglas van Buren (1945) attempted to combine symbols described in texts with those familiar from images. This work remains seminal, yet further research on text and images has shown that often there is no match between them. The rays generally attributed to the sun god Shamash, and the moon crescent (singly or atop a post) associated with the moon god Sin, furnish prime examples. On only about one-third of the seals inscribed with a theophoric personal name was there a match between the god's name and the divine emblem depicted in the seal design. Seal-carvers and scribes seldom chose the same deities (Braun-Holzinger 1993, 1996; Collon 1997).

Text and Image as a “Collage”

While historians of European art routinely interpret medieval, Renaissance, or Baroque monuments in the light of biblical and classical texts, scholars of the ancient Near East face a far more challenging situation. First, with the exception of sealed documents, images and texts seldom coincide. The thousands of economic, administrative, legal, and historical texts, omens, and letters preserved in cuneiform records did not need to be accompanied by images, or “illustrated.” Given the great interest created by early discoveries of Mesopotamian literature, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, scholars understandably turned to the abundant corpus of images preserved on cylinder seals and sought to interpret them in the light of literary mythological narratives. Yet scholars can seldom agree on identifying the few scenes on seals, terracotta plaques, or reliefs that may be linked to a myth preserved in literary sources (Sonik 2014). Two episodes from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* have been identified on cylinder seals or terracotta plaques: combat scenes between two men and a monster, presumably Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu battling Huwawa/Humbaba, the fearsome guardian of the Cedar Forest; and the slaying of the Bull of Heaven by Gilgamesh and Enkidu (Green 1993–97, 1997; Steymans 2010). A related avenue of research into correlating texts with images concerns representations of fantastic creatures that are sometimes also called “mythical figures,” although they cannot always be strictly related to mythical narratives (Green 1993–97). Through meticulous philological

studies of ritual texts, Frans Wiggermann (1992, 1993–97) succeeded in identifying by name many monsters and demons represented in Mesopotamian art and clarifying their iconography (Black and Green 1992).

The rich repertoire of mythological subjects on Akkadian-period cylinder seals furnishes a well-known example of related problems of interpretation (Figure 3.4). The seal designs exhibit a wealth of scenes involving divine figures furnished with distinctive dress, headgear, weapons, or other attributes, often engaged in ritual activities, along with multiple hybrid creatures. Henri Frankfort (1939: 91–141) attempted a methodical study of imagery on Akkadian seals, advocating the cautious use of literary texts from much later periods “with a view to relevant allusions” (1939: 93). For him, the seal in Figure 3.4 depicted the enthroned water god Ea, to whom a bird-man, here tied to a mace held over the shoulder of a minor god, is led captive. Frankfort identified the bird-man with the evil bird Zu mentioned in much later texts. Yet another glyptic expert, Pierre Amiet (1980: 47), interpreted the scene instead as the death of symbols of vegetation. For him the world of images in Akkadian glyptic was an autonomous mythological realm, an iconography of religious thought independent of texts. While Amiet’s approach has been much criticized, such radically different interpretations underscore the complicated methodology involved in linking texts and images (Suter 2000: 7–10, with literature).



Figure 3.4 Cylinder seal and modern impression: water god, two-faced god, and two minor gods carrying plant and bird man. Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2220 BCE). Serpentine; 32.5 × 19.5 mm. The Morgan Library & Museum, Morgan Seal 198.

The “Assyrian sacred tree,” a treelike object that often appears in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, glyptic, and other media, is my final example of an image notoriously difficult to interpret via written sources (see Figure 3.2; see also Figure 12.3 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). Despite its frequency, no descriptions have come to light in cuneiform sources. Before 1900, three main

interpretations were proposed: a “tree of life,” connected with the biblical “tree of life” (Genesis 2–3); a stylized date palm; and a constructed cult object, representing a divinity in aniconic form. The date palm theory received a significant endorsement from the eminent anthropologist E. B. Tylor, who first formulated the influential idea that Neo-Assyrian art depicted the date palm being fertilized by winged genii (figures now identified as mythical sages or *apkallus*). Once a critical mass of scholars had decided on the stylized date palm, they could proceed to analyze its meaning. In her study of the history of its interpretation, Mariana Giovino (2007: 4–5) emphasized the crucial importance of “pre-iconographical” identity, in Panofsky’s terminology. Despite the wide acceptance of the date palm theory, Giovino opted instead to identify the “Assyrian sacred tree” as a constructed cult object, a theory she found supported by both textual and archaeological evidence.

The “Fribourg School”: The Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography

Beginning in the 1970s, the Swiss theologian Othmar Keel and his students introduced a new era in the study of ancient Near Eastern visual culture. In an early work, Keel (1972) compared the literary imagery of the Psalms with ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian pictorial sources related to a range of themes: the celestial and terrestrial world, death, demons, temples, conceptions of God, kings, humans before God. A later study linked the demons and monsters described in the Hebrew Bible with the hybrid creatures depicted in Mesopotamia (Keel 1977). Here Keel contested the prevalent view that the biblical ban on images was related to a wider hostility to pictorial representations in ancient Israel. The “Fribourg School” developed new methodologies for investigating the relationship between texts and visual media, which began by interrogating each category separately. At the same time, this approach seeks to understand biblical texts and the biblical world as part of a much broader visual and cultural field extending to Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Drawing explicitly on yet modifying Panofsky’s iconographic and iconological approach, the “Fribourg School” emphasizes the central role of images in what has traditionally been the text-focused field of biblical studies (Keel 1992). The key unit of analysis is the motif, which is traced across multiple visual media to establish a “motif history.” Single motifs are part of a larger system of signs, to be considered within a “constellation” or patterned relationship of elements. Images represent reality through the mediation of motifs (Weissenrieder and Wendt 2005: 20–27, with bibliography). Thus, even simple and repetitive motifs can be as important as religious, political, or

symbolic motifs. From this perspective, all categories of visual media merit investigation. Given the dearth of monumental art in the Levant, however, the “Fribourg School” has emphasized the vast available corpus of images preserved on small-scale objects such as seals, amulets, and figurines.

Many studies resulting from this approach have been disseminated in the monograph series *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, which has become a chief venue for publishing scholarship in the ancient Near Eastern visual field. A related project, *Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East*, began as a companion to the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst 1995). This publication seeks to assemble a wide-ranging, multi-authored catalogue of deities and demons across the entire ancient Near Eastern field, with special reference to the western Levant in the first millennium BCE. Entries address “iconographical typology,” geographical and chronological range, object types, and an attempt at “iconological interpretation” within ancient religious and cultural settings.

The Purpose and Persistence of Images

An investigative methodology should begin with a general reflection on the meaning and purpose of images in ancient Mesopotamia. The human use of symbols, of course, long predates the emergence of literate Mesopotamian civilization (Nieuwenhuyse et al. 2013). Images (and words) represent an aspect of the real world, but precisely what they stand for is arbitrary and requires investigation. We attempt to reconstruct a cognitive map to help us understand the images, but we simultaneously reconstruct the cognitive map through the images. To cope with this paradox, images must be analyzed both intrinsically (their subject, formal composition, the elements composing the image, conventions) and extrinsically (the context in which the images were found, their use, mode of production, value, and so on). In ancient cultures, images were also concepts. Each object had a purpose, and each motif, from floral ornament to the lion hunt, was also symbolically and religiously significant. Geometric patterns, waves, rosettes, or battlements belonged to the vast field of “decoration” endowed with protective powers—which is not to say that aesthetic ideas played no part in creating pictures and designs. The usefulness of the images may help explain why the repertoire of subjects was limited.

Why an image is created, and why it remains popular or disappears, is difficult to determine even in modern times. Images and texts persist because a durable match between their message and ongoing social concerns has been particularly well conceived. In the ancient Near East, the “master of animals” image of the male hero holding or flanked by two animals preserved its profound meaning over millennia (Counts and Arnold 2010; Neumann-

Gorsolke 2012). The symbolic clarity of images, such as the king as lion-hunter or as builder carrying a basket of bricks on his head, remains impressive even today. Yet other recurring images in Mesopotamian art, such as the banquet scene, the sacred tree, and numerous individual gestures, postures, or compositions, still lie largely beyond our detailed comprehension.

Images would have been copied over long periods, or perhaps “lost” and later revived (Roaf 2000; Garrison 2012). The king hunting lions or in triumphant pose trampling an enemy persisted over millennia. Images that emerged, disappeared, and reemerged were either preserved through older examples or written descriptions, or perhaps reinvented. The ruler as builder, shown with a basket of bricks on his head, appears in the Early Dynastic and Ur III periods and again in Neo-Assyrian times, with Assurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shumu-ukin (see Figure 12.5 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). The parasol, a royal symbol, occurs only in the official art of the Akkadian king Sargon (2334–2279 BCE) and fifteen hundred years later, with the Neo-Assyrian kings Assurnasirpal II and Assurbanipal.

Another important issue concerns the recognition of gods in the “classical” form of an ancient polytheism established, at the latest, by the early third millennium BCE. This new religion in Mesopotamia clearly developed from an altered social hierarchy, in which the pantheon became increasingly harmonized with human society. As a result, the gods acquired an anthropomorphic nature and could not be distinguished from human beings. A visual distinction between gods and humans was achieved by means of the horned headdress, which emerged as the most important divine characteristic from about 2700 BCE onward (see Figure 3.4, for example). The written counterpart is the Sumerian sign **dingir** (“god”), written before the names of deities (Braun-Holzinger 2013). Gods are conceived as anthropomorphic but they are also likened to animals, which provide attributes with which deities can be depicted. Gods cannot always be recognized, however; and even when we can identify a deity as such, it is frequently difficult to specify the deity in question. Attributes were mutable and interchangeable, or appropriate for multiple deities.

Missing “Images” and Their Interpretation

The problem of interpretation comes to the fore where there is no image at all, and when cultic activity without visible images seems to resemble that accompanied by images. Modern scholarship has consistently assumed that hostility to images was largely confined to the western Semites and the nomads of the southern Levant—a view derived from the virulent biblical

prohibition against images (Deuteronomy 4.12–20) and the supposedly numerous plain stones found in sacred contexts in Israel. In reality, the tension between iconic and aniconic representation of the gods encompassed the entire ancient Near East. The term *aniconism* refers to the absence of representations of living, divine, or mythical beings (Berlejung 2009: 1210–11; Nunn 2010: 132–35).

Depending on time and place in the ancient Near East, worshipers oscillated between these two poles to achieve a suitable image of a deity (Ornan 2005, 2009; Herles 2006; Nicolle 2011). Thus, studying cultic images together with an absence of images appears more promising than focusing exclusively on the history of a lack of images (Nunn 2010). Unlike Egypt, in Mesopotamia the most important deities were of human form. But images of gods were also accompanied by animals and symbols, which could be particular to them. From about 1400 BCE, and especially in the first millennium, these animals, symbols, and hybrid creatures began to function independently and were depicted alone instead of in the anthropomorphic form. The Sun-god Tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina from Sippar (Figure 3.5) records that the emblem of the god Shamash replaced the cult statue of the deity for two hundred years after the statue was destroyed. The tablet itself depicts both the divine sun symbol and the new, anthropomorphic statue of Shamash commissioned by the king to replace the lost image (Ornan 2005: 122–24; Nunn 2010: 137).

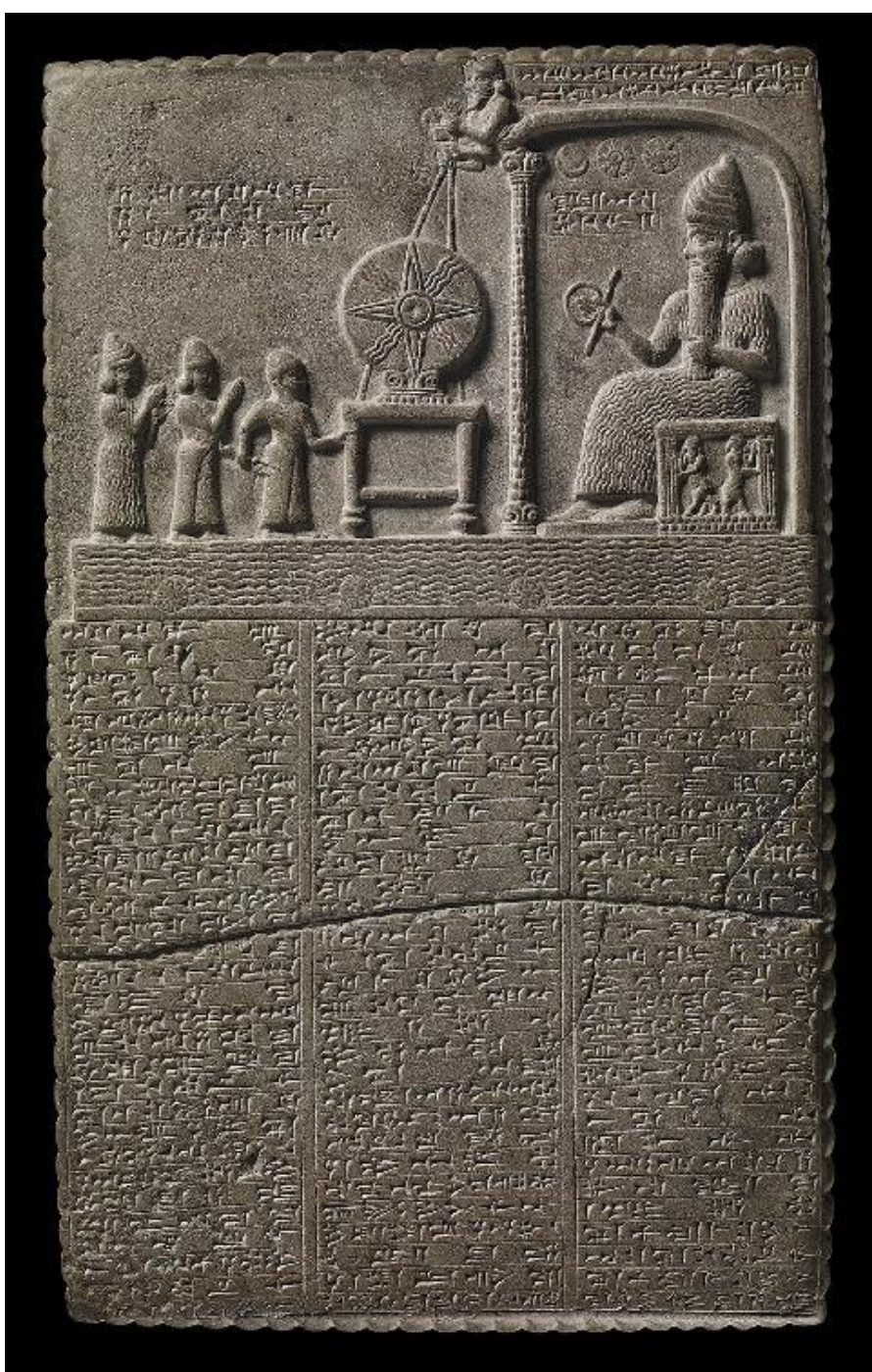


Figure 3.5 Sun-god Tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina. Sippar, reign of Nabu-apla-iddina (ninth century BCE). Gray schist; 29.5 × 17.8 cm. British Museum ME 91000

Cult images are a means of communication between humans and gods whose primary precondition is divine immanence. The possession of such divine indwelling was a prerequisite for any change to a new image with different external form. This is the case both for anthropomorphic and abstract representations of the divine in Mesopotamia. Thus, it was not the perception of the divine that changed, but rather its visual expression. As soon as the mental image of a deity and the deity's "real" appearance are uncoupled, figurative and non-figurative images can coexist. Even when the gods are mostly conceived anthropomorphically, as in the ancient Near East, there is a visual "expression" in both figurative and non-figurative "representations."

In the case of non-figurative representation, the image and the conception of its anthropomorphic divine body could be supplemented or replaced through words, either orally or in writing. Moreover, the aniconic has a much broader application and semantic field than was previously thought. A recent survey, both chronologically (fourth to first millennium BCE) and geographically broad, has shown that the erection of plain stelae was practiced both in rural and urban settings, and that it could have a cultic, legal, funerary, ancestor-related, and commemorative significance (Nicolle [2011](#)).

The choice of whether to represent a cult object as non-figurative or anthropomorphic indicates multiple forms of religious expression, which were not mutually exclusive; on the contrary, they were complementary. They were theologically and religiously equivalent, and at the same time extrinsically, but not ontologically, different. Upright plain stones and symbols allowed worshipers to escape both the uncomfortable sense that human traits were inadequate for representing the divine, and the uneasy feeling of encountering a man-made image of a deity. They could thus avoid the "unbearable splendor" of the gods, which humans should not, or did not want to, see.

Conclusion

Art is a complex system of intentionality, a means of communication, a symbolic language on several levels—religious, political, legal, and emotional. Whether the creators are labeled "craftsmen" or "artists" seems to me of marginal importance. In ancient Mesopotamia, a royal statue was meant as a gift for the gods as well as an effigy intended to awe ordinary people. The practitioner's expertise consisted in finding a suitable expression for this set of purposes.

Such a definition would have been unthinkable for a scholar of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, whether applied to ancient Greek art—then the universal reference point—or to prehistoric female figurines, which were not considered "art," but at most a valuable token of human development. This

perspective results from a long process of reflection, the consequence of globalized explanations encompassing extremely diverse situations in which images appear and function. Purely formal and stylistic issues no longer dominate studies of visual media in the ancient Near East. Nonetheless, handbooks, excavation reports, and catalogues remain a necessary foundation for scholarship devoted to understanding their purpose and meaning.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* furnishes a wealth of information on many topics addressed in this chapter. Specialized studies devoted to issues in iconography, text, and image are regularly published in the monograph series *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* (Fribourg and Göttingen) and *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* (Münster). Multiple contributions in Brown and Feldman 2014 treat related subjects of text, image, and interpretation, primarily with respect to Mesopotamian monuments. A conference considered issues specific to interpreting images in the absence of contemporaneous texts (Taylor 2008).

For Mesopotamian art, Green (1993–97, 1997) surveys the subject of myths, and the papers in Steymans 2010 examine the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. On correlations between text and image, and writing and art, see also Postgate 1994 and Cooper 2008.

The Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East (IDD) project, based at the University of Zurich, publishes online a multi-authored compendium of entries on individual subjects: <http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/index.php>. In addition, the site features pre-print publication of essays treating several geographical/cultural regions in the Near East (contributions on Iran, Cyprus, and the Hittite/Luwian/Aramaean kingdoms have appeared).

Berlejung 2009 succinctly surveys the subject of aniconism, with bibliography.

Preziosi 2009 assembles a useful collection of key texts in the field of art history, including works by J. J. Winckelmann, A. Riegl, A. Warburg, and E. Panofsky. New English translations of seminal writings include Warburg 1999 and Winckelmann 2006.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Style

Margaret Cool Root

Introduction

Style connotes a set of factors of form discernible in a fabricated thing. These factors become a means of defining, describing, categorizing, and clustering material productions of a certain class and environment, with their verbally describable commonalities seen to form a discrete style. Although undecorated classes of artifact can also be analyzed stylistically, our focus here is on representational art. At its core, a *representational* style embraces aspects of line, mass, and composition (the structure of relationships between discrete elements). From this core, wider circles of diagnostic criteria may include a penchant for certain materials, tools, techniques, and patterns of iconographical preference. Basic stylistic classification can contribute to tracing networks of trade and cultural exchange as well as to dating.

From these core considerations of formal attributes, rich potentials emerge for interrogating the *implications* of style. At the same time, ambiguities and fluidities of definitional boundary or positioning of the investigator of style inevitably determine, illuminate, complicate, or obscure the potential utilities of the analytical process itself. And an investigator's lack of transparency or self-awareness concerning the fragilities of an approach or the weighting of factors can fatally flaw the pursuit. This chapter explores some of these complexities, first with reference to historiographical features of the discourse and then with reference to particular examples.

Challenges of Style for the Study of Ancient Near Eastern Art

A classic essay on style by Meyer Schapiro ([1953] [1962](#), [1994](#)), a distinguished historian of medieval and modern European art, enjoys enduring, if fluctuating, resonance within disciplines central to the study of ancient Near Eastern visual culture: art history, archaeology, and anthropology. It is the ideal starting point for a jargon-free statement of what

style can mean and what jobs it can do. Yet the notion of style remains vexed and contentious. Attempts to characterize it in a broadly useful manner, as Schapiro aimed to do, are perhaps fatally vulnerable to competing forces. His essay was sharply disparaged in the 1990s for not being theoretically *au courant*. Alan Wallach (1997) rightly reminded critics that Schapiro's intellectual formation took place in the 1920s and deserved assessment within that context. Indeed, one implicit asset of Schapiro's essay was its separation from the baggage of Alois Riegl's influential 1893 treatise, *Stilfragen*. That work, and Riegl's subsequent oeuvre, championed a rigorous empirical formal analysis (Riegl 1893, 1992). But while valorizing style's utility as a tool, it aimed to characterize an aggregated concept of style harnessed to an agenda of historical positivism grounded in a notion of national/ethnic/"racial" predilection (Elsner 2006).

In the legacy of literature on style, not least pertaining to ancient Near Eastern art, the issue of ethnic or "racial" style looms large. Especially in the nineteenth century and through the Nazi era, human groups were divided into subspecies denoted as "races," based on physical differences such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture. These physical departures from a normative Caucasian appearance were thought to imply hard-wired deficiencies in intelligence, morality, and taste. The scientific community now generally accepts that *genetic* differences between subgroups of the human species are minuscule. These differences are important for researchers dealing with epidemiological issues in order to ascertain susceptibility to a specific disease. They are not, however, determinants of approaches to art production. Ethnicity is a much more fluid term relating to culture and cultural adaptation rather than genetic inevitability. Unfortunately, contemporary discourses of popular culture persist in clustering *race* and *ethnicity* as equally valid parts of one construct. This leads to confusion for today's art history student, reinforcing an idea of ethnic style as coterminous with the now discredited notion of "racial" style. The past tendency of such concepts to be the organs of racist and xenophobic agendas has tainted them in scholarly circles, with eminent art historians pressing the issues over successive generations (e.g., Gombrich 1961; Ginzburg 1998). But they played an undeniable role in the study of ancient Near Eastern art in the West (Root 2005: 234–46).

We do better to speak of *social groups* and their uses of style as markers of cohesion or exclusion (see Pollock 1983). However we characterize styles in relation to cultural identity, Schapiro offered an important warning: an artist need not be born into a style. A well-trained artist in antiquity, as today, could replicate an earlier style or a "foreign" style as a commission demanded. Writing about Romanesque church sculpture, Schapiro ([1947] 1977: 22) detected numerous not-quite-suppressed regionalisms in the sculptural style of a particular program fabricated by a team of artisans who converged from more than one area. Conversely, he also observed that powerful religious

messages could be conveyed by artisans who did not necessarily share the faith that the patron aimed to promote. Even for the relatively well-documented arena of medieval European art, these issues posed apparently irreconcilable challenges to a readership seeking definitive resolutions to questions of style (Seidel 2006: 109). For the much more opaque ancient Near Eastern arena, the challenges are even greater, tempting some scholars to avoid the struggle of working with style.

Although Schapiro's 1953 essay continues to be cited across the fields he addressed, his laudable attempt to be objective raises legitimate unease today around the very notion that there can be one clinically correct way to discern and categorize visual phenomena.¹ In part, this position reflects concern over assessments of *quality* embedded in stylistic classifications, since such assessments may tend to be based on modern Western cultural values rather than those of the intended historical receiver. Current works on archaeological theory frequently eschew the word "style" altogether because of its baggage. They prefer other, less encumbered terms—such as taxonomy and structural code—when discussing notions that Schapiro bundled as "factors of style" (e.g., Preucel 2006). Nevertheless, important essays written in recent decades, intended for a fairly wide academic readership, have continued to use the word style (e.g., Lang [1979] 1987). Contemplations on style today as an art historical tool (Elsner 2003) and as a tool in field archaeology and in archaeological inquiry more generally (Conkey and Hastorf 1990; Gunter 2009: 80–123) address potentials and pitfalls in how we deploy its underlying ideas and assumptions.

Potentials of Stylistic Analysis, I: Selected Examples from Ancient Near Eastern Art

The notion of a "period style," with the subsets of contemporaneously produced styles that may coexist in the same cultural-historical arena, is deeply engrained in the study of ancient Near Eastern art. A sub-style within a larger period style may be particularly revealing of mandates in social allegiance or stratification (Schapiro [1953] 1962: 294).

The site of Hasanlu in northwestern Iran, destroyed by cataclysmic invasion around 800 BCE, offers an informative case study of such a sub-style. This community operated vulnerably on the frontiers of both Neo-Assyrian and Urartian power. Finds demonstrate the strong presence of materials created in a style associated with the Neo-Assyrian court to the west. Hasanlu's inhabitants also generated works in a distinctive sub-style, labeled the Hasanlu local style, apparently confined to a circumscribed arena of production and consumption. In metalwork, ivorycarving, and seals, diagnostic features of

detail constitute this style, confidently traced through large data sets of meticulously excavated objects (Marcus 1996, with bibliography). The development and proliferation of the Hasanlu local style, including its deployment on prestige objects reflecting considerable investment in material and labor, signals a conscious group self-presentation. Style here becomes an intentional conveyor of meaning as a definer of cohesive social identity. The local style may even have expressed a resistant or subversive differentiation from the threatening imperial powers to the west and north. Crucially, scholars examining these artifacts have focused systematically on transparently articulated formal stylistic criteria, thereby sustaining analyses of larger implications.

In contrast, a problematic case is the “international style” of the Late Bronze Age Greater Mediterranean (ca. 1400–1200 BCE), a much-discussed phenomenon characterized across multiple cultural-geographic regions in close contact via trade and diplomacy. The word *style* in this doubled term has been used loosely to connote a set of motifs and formats rather than specific formal characteristics of design and fabrication. Thus the term confuses, and even undermines, the project of attempting to delineate “style” in its most basic senses as a useful concept. Marian H. Feldman (2002, 2006) presents the term’s history and ambiguities. Seeking clarity in this vexed analytical tradition, she uses the word *style* in a highly restricted sense to define sets of “minutiae of formal details” that might be attributable to the same hand or workshop (Feldman 2002: 7). She then weaves “style” thus defined into a hierarchy of terms for larger notions: “tradition,” for instance, becomes synonymous with “cultural style.” This deconstruction is welcome, even as the complexity of issues involved in rescuing “style” from loose application exposes its frailty in academic practice and elucidates tensions between competing terminological platforms. A significant opportunity may reside in finding “sweet spots” of analysis, wherein we can explore the marriage of empirically assessed sets of formal features delineated through microanalysis with composite sets of insignia that together emit affect and trigger effect upon receivers. The fabricated thing has inherent power to project meaning through its strategic *complicity* of bundled formal and iconographical features.² For this approach to work compellingly, the formal elements of style need rigorous articulation as a starting point for considering bundled affective agency.

Two cases from the monumental courtly production of the Achaemenid Persian Empire demonstrate how this complicity of formal style and iconography can cohere to yield a greater whole. In the Bisotun rock relief of Darius I in western Iran (519 BCE), the iconography of king victorious on a mountain (with layers of additional symbolic features) deliberately reaches back to multiple pasts in Near Eastern royal tradition from the Akkadian and Neo-Assyrian periods (Root 1979: 182–226; 2013), with elements of bodily

and sartorial *style* reinforcing these links with ancient power (Root 1979: esp. 213–18; Feldman 2007). The package is an “archaizing” sub-style within the Achaemenid imperial context. As such, it performs in such calculated ways, involving such ideologically invested patron mandate in formal and iconographical entanglement, that it stands as an unusually clear example of the message-force of style-as-form.

A second, more subtle example is the elaborately sculptured ceremonial high place or Takht (Persian “throne”) of Persepolis, heartland capital of the Achaemenid Empire in southwestern Iran, founded by Darius around 515 BCE. A full-bore stylistic analysis of the architectural sculpture of Persepolis remains to be written, despite insightful descriptive observations in handbooks by Edith Porada and Pierre Amiet, for example. Michael Roaf’s (1983) meticulous study of formal criteria of workmanship in certain elements of the reliefs remains important for its empirical presentation of visual data; its interpretive leap toward analyzing individual artistic hands seems to me problematic on several counts, however (Root 1986; *pace* Di Paoli 2014: 119–21). His project was underway simultaneously with my initial large-scale *iconographical* study of Achaemenid art as a programmatic ideological endeavor engaging style, compositional strategies and extended metaphors, and spatial experience (Root 1979). A new synthetic effort could combine elements of both early studies to articulate how the architectural sculpture of Persepolis “has style,” as form and iconography together yield a cohesive affective experience across an expansive architectural landscape. A preliminary effort isolated one discrete formal feature: a delicately rendered tongue pattern used in multiple contexts and combinations as a detail element across the vast expanses of floral and animal forms on the reliefs (Root 1990: esp. 125–26). The systematic deployment of this visual trope with precisely replicated features of form signals that it was designed to produce an *experience* of style in Persepolis, expressing an aesthetic ideology of harmonious hegemony as assertively on a formal level as the program’s iconography projected this ideology on a metaphorical level.

A further contingency of stylistic characterization in relation to meaning may involve the notion of *quality* and its potential for message conveyance. An analysis of the lion hunt reliefs across multiple registers in Room C of Assurbanipal’s palace at Nineveh (Aker 2007) delineates levels of sculptural quality that distinguish the scenes incorporating the king and his inner circle from those depicting rank-and-file figures. Aker interprets this differentiation as a systematic regulation of skill intended stylistically to reinforce hierarchy. While concerns persist in theory about how notions of quality can appropriately be deployed without cultural bias, the case here may be compelling because the data are contained within a specific, delimited, contemporaneous production context that permits direct comparison.

Potentials of Stylistic Analysis, II: Ancient Near Eastern Glyptic

The medium of glyptic art furnishes a unique opportunity further to explore analytical potentials of style. A seal is a vehicle carved in the negative (intaglio) with some device, which might include an inscription. In the ancient Near East, two basic forms of seal were used in various cultures and periods: the stamp seal, carved intaglio on a basically flat surface; and the cylinder seal, carved in intaglio around a cylindrical form. When pressed into or rolled across a malleable medium such as damp clay, the seal device yields a positive impression: a “seal impression” or “sealing.” Because so many people owned and used seals from late prehistory onward, and because they were made of durable materials (usually stone), the category offers a large body of surviving evidence both as seals (the object matrices) and as impressions applied to clay to secure and label commodities and to ratify text transactions. Glyptic invites us into a world of multiple social groups and entities in a given community: from gods and temples to courtly elites, to lower-level professionals and individual personages.

Many thousands of seals are known today, either as seal artifacts or through impressions made in antiquity. Rarely do we have both the seal matrix and one or more of its impressions. Sealings provide rich information on social networks and social/economic history, since they can typically be tied to uses and to specific individuals or institutions. A seal known only through its impressions rather than through a static seal matrix—even if a scientifically excavated one—may be richly informative about how and when it was used, the social orbits of its making and performance as an artifact, and other features relating to what was considered a viable finish to a seal for deployment as a social tool (Root 1999). Conversely, the seal matrix alone can tell us the type of stone from which it was carved or, if preserved, the precise nature of the metal fitting that may have conferred additional prestige value on the seal as a proudly worn and used personal possession (Collon 2001).

Seals present instructive challenges to and possibilities for using style as a cultural diagnostic of the environment in which they or their impressions have been recovered archaeologically. They were eminently portable as well as supremely important to people and their psycho-social identities. They traveled with their owners, who sometimes lost them. When that happened, the owner had to acquire a new one: by gift, off-the-shelf purchase, or through a fresh commission. Such a need might arise when the owner was far from home, thus complicating the possibilities of stylistic affinity of the replacement seal. As prized personal objects, seals were frequently interred with their owners or handed down as heirlooms, thus lingering in the archaeological record sometimes for thousands of years. *Seal impressions*

were also portable. Wherever a seal owner traveled with a seal, he or she left behind impressions in clay in that new place. Similarly, seals used to secure and label containers of commodities, or to ratify documents that were then sent elsewhere, traveled on their own as impressed images.

Seals pose instructive tests of style as a diagnostic tool for dating associated finds. Their small, compact nature made them susceptible to movement up or down through archaeologically defined strata when not encapsulated within closed deposits, such as undisturbed tombs. Thus, while a seal whose period of manufacture is closely datable through style can be useful in dating an archaeological context—at minimum providing an approximate date after which the context must have been formed—its usefulness here has limitations (Dyson and Harris 1986: esp. 85–86).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, classifications of ancient seals and intaglio-carved amulets were based on intuitive assumptions concerning unprovenanced artifacts driven by exuberantly biased Western cultural expectations. Adolf Furtwängler's (1900) classification of ancient gems exemplifies this approach, which followed the lead of J. J. Winckelmann in the eighteenth century. It is against this backdrop that we must appreciate Henri Frankfort's (1939) landmark study of Near Eastern cylinder seals, which also treated definitions of period styles. In his introductory contemplation of "The Relative Values of Stratigraphy and Stylistic Analysis," Frankfort (1955: 1–6) laid out the problematics of stratigraphy in determining the dating of a seal artifact, and thus its period style. Issues of date of manufacture versus date of use, which may have extended over a lengthy period, were important in Frankfort's excursus. Excavations in the Diyala Valley proved the simultaneous production and coexistence of more than one style, challenging any *facile* notion of period style. Indeed, the distribution of seals made in variant styles across site strata seemed to present "an incomprehensible jumble of styles" (1955: 3), which he gamely strove to understand and continually to reassess.

Historically, rationales for naming glyptic styles have varied. Sometimes the name scholars assign derives from the site where the visual phenomenon was first identified. In such cases the site-specific name also encodes an implicit temporal parameter of production, even though the type-site may have enjoyed a long history before and after the era with which it became linked; the Uruk Style of the late Protoliterate era and the city of Uruk is an excellent example. In other instances, naming may be *period*-specific, as in Neo-Babylonian Style. Nested within such period-specific rubrics may be visually descriptive sub-styles, such as Neo-Babylonian Modeled Style or Neo-Babylonian Cut Style, instances where formal stylistic subgroups operate within a larger framework of many shared iconographical features of the same cultural milieu (Porada 1947; Root 2003). Still other names reflect socio-political circumstances of production or dissemination. Sometimes a name

appears to characterize a taxonomic style, when in fact it designates a *mode* of expressive production specific to a period and cultural locus that bundles formal characteristics with many other factors. An example is the so-called glazed steatite glyptic style of Elam (late fourth to third millennium BCE) (Pittman 1994: xv–xxii).

Style categories (and the serious efforts underpinning their determinations) have become useful disciplinary conventions, whatever the confusing ambiguities of their naming protocols outside a small scholarly circle. But in recent decades, the acceptance of these monikers seems to have made ongoing interrogation of style in glyptic research old news to many: an accomplished effort that no longer demands or merits scholarly investment. A 1976 symposium intended to foster new approaches to glyptic was based on that premise:

There are numerous publications on stamp and cylinder seals, and the field of glyptic study is vigorously healthy. Most studies of seals, however, are stylistic or iconographic. They deal with changes in style and content through time or from place to place, or even artist to artist. Very little has been done to define the function of seals and the practice of sealing in the ancient world.

(Gibson and Biggs 1977: 3)

About twenty-five years later, a summary of where glyptic studies have been and where they might meaningfully go considered studies of style in seals as part of a “well-recognized developmental process *through which every field must pass*—from early work on ‘classification’ and analysis of imagery (both style, for purposes of typology/chronology, and iconography, for purposes of exploring meaningful representational themes in the cultural space ...) to subsequent work on function and socio-political meaning, authority, and identity ...” (Winter 2001: 2, emphasis added). In other words, style has been “done”—as part of the indispensable effort needed in order to proceed to more cutting-edge projects in the sociological or theoretical vein.

There are important reasons for returning to the study of style today, through the lens of seals. To begin, I single out one now-contentious issue that is embedded in art historical tradition: hand attribution analysis. Bodies of excavated glyptic evidence open up exciting new possibilities for enlightened and critically aware deployment of this old and much-discredited methodology to serve fresh interests. Attribution analysis famously emerged with Giorgio Vasari and his explorations of the oeuvres of Italian Renaissance masters. Two hundred years later, in 1892, Giovanni Morelli advanced his highly influential presentation of style as a package of individual artistic traits—many largely unconscious—that were persistently and faithfully replicated as personally idiosyncratic signature elements of a specific artistic hand. J. D. Beazley (1885–1990) became the master technician of Morellian analysis

serving studies of Attic painted pottery (Kurtz 1983). Adapting the Renaissance approach was especially inviting for Greek vase painting because this ancient corpus included exemplars bearing the name of a potter or painter. Around these data, unsigned products could be clustered and analyzed in much the same process as that practiced by scholars of Italian Renaissance painting.

Among others, Michael Shanks (1996: 22–41) expressed discomfort with this approach as a retrogressive tool of market-driven connoisseurship. On methodological grounds, he critiqued attribution as connoisseurship practiced according to ill-defined (or undefined) methods by scholars who frequently presented their findings on the basis of material in private collections they were exclusively privileged to examine and which, thus, could never be checked by an independent eye. He charged such efforts with practicing a form of elitism. In historiographical terms, he saw these practices as reflections of ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism, since these connoisseurs viewed art through a pervasively Eurocentric eye from a stance of cultural superiority, granting them license to determine quality without clearly stipulated criteria. Shanks (1996: 33–34) characterized the ulterior motive for attribution analysis as “a search for the autonomous individual who has escaped the passing of time.” In his view, connoisseurs operated without reference to or interest in social, political, or historical context. Additionally, excitement over the “theoretical turn” in archaeology and art history made empirical analysis itself, irrespective of methods, seem, for a time, outmoded. Voices in the study of Aegean Bronze Age and Greek art have urged renewed engagement with attribution as a method—but with clarified goals based on appreciation of its uses and abuses (Morris 1993; Neer 2005).

Research in ancient Near Eastern glyptic is where we witness the most vivid validation of attribution analysis as a method of potential significance for understanding social history. Specialists have adapted features of, or ideas behind, its analytical protocols to contexts where corpora of seals or sealings have yielded samples conducive to isolating workshops and (within them) individual artistic “hands” (Collon 1986; Kelly-Buccellati 1998: esp. 41–50). Tabulating clearly defined formal criteria, their results demonstrate how this method can reveal the interactions of a small group of notional artists operating in proximity within the same cultural milieu.³ In particular, analysis of the corpus of over 1,200 sealings excavated from third-millennium Urkesh (modern Tell Mozan), in modern Syria, illuminates a courtly context of multiple artists operating within the same patronage system, with one interesting cohort working specifically for the queen and her retainers (Kelly-Buccellati 1998). Through serious study of style, the Urkesh sealings disclose innovative features borne of intense patron-artist dialogue, giving us a glimpse of visualized expressions of a local dynastic ideology that otherwise would remain beyond our reach.

Seal Styles and the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE)

We turn now to case studies examining style in glyptic art, with particular emphasis on the Achaemenid Empire. The empire held sway over the entire geographical area this volume addresses, and even extended much farther east. Abundant glyptic evidence consisting of several excavated archives of sealed documents and excavated corpora of seal artifacts furnishes expansive, supple data for testing and expressing the utilities and limitations of style. These corpora—particularly sealed documents—yield material wonderfully suited to quantitative analyses and social networking analyses. Furthermore, this empire stood at a critical moment following thousands of years of seal production and use. Seal carving in this environment was stylistically innovative as well as creatively retrospective.

Our topic engages “Achaemenid art,” defined as the official production created by and for the court in variant nuances from the heartland centers of southwestern Iran to the satrapal (regional administrative) centers throughout the empire. It also engages art produced for people, including members of the royal family, as “private” expressions. One large archive of sealed imperial administrative documents consisting of clay tablets excavated from the fortification of Persepolis, the heartland’s regional administrative center and imperial ceremonial capital, is crucial (Garrison and Root 2001: 23–32; Briant, Henkelman, and Stolper 2008). The Persepolis Fortification tablets are joined by the Persepolis Treasury tablets and other archives of clay documents from temple and business contexts in Mesopotamia, along with smaller corpora of sealed clay tabs (bullae) once attached to documents on papyrus and parchment recovered from satrapal settings (Garrison and Root 2001: 32–9; Kaptan 2002; Colburn 2014: 91–115). Seals recovered from excavations over a wide geographical range complement the picture derived principally from these information-rich archives (Dusinberre 2003: 158–71, 264–83; 2005).

The Persepolis Fortification (PF) tablets comprise around 20,000 clay records impressed with at least one seal and often with the seals of multiple people and offices, representing individuals ranging from royalty to commodity disbursers, travel guides, and camel drivers. The portion of the archive excavated thus far dates between 509 and 493 BCE in the reign of Darius I (522–486 BCE), yielding an enormous sample of seals preserved through impressions. Taken together, the occurrences of seals associated with text information on people and their activities within a short period invite us to revisit style as a social instrument. We can explore stylistic preferences of specific individuals and we can also study how these individual owners chose

to apply their seals on the tablets to highlight selective features of composition (Root 2008).

Drawing on a subset of those seals occurring on 2,097 mostly dated tablet texts published by R. T. Hallock in 1969, Mark Garrison (1988) undertook a close stylistic analysis of all seals displaying any version of heroic encounter imagery (one-third of the total corpus of about 1,162 analytically legible discrete seals, each used on as many as fifty different tablets), in which a human or humanoid creature controls or grapples with one or more creatures. By limiting his initial stylistic analysis to one motif (albeit with myriad sub-types), Garrison narrowed the iconographic variables in order to focus on the study of form according to stringent protocols. The seals of heroic encounter have been fully published (Garrison and Root 2001); all remaining seals in the research corpus will soon appear in two more volumes. Interim publications introduce interpretive issues of iconography and style revealed by the entire corpus (e.g., Garrison 2000, 2014a).

Court Style

The term *court style* implies a central authority that commissions the development of a system of formal elements (signifiers of association via style), which define and project within the group and to the larger world a presence and visual framing of social values. A court style developed for the Akkadian dynasty (2334–2154 BCE) displays muscular volumetric forms, expressive detailing, and iconographically complex compositions (Collon [1987] 2005: 32–35), combining to push outward into the viewer's space with startling presence as the seal user makes the impression on the clay surface. The Victory Stele of Naram-Sin shares these bundled characteristics in monumental sculptural mode (Winter 1996) (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume). Two seals inscribed for courtiers working for named members of the royal family exhibit these shared stylistic characteristics and, like the Stele of Naram-Sin, incorporate focused attention on the bodily address of the relevant named royal personage.⁴ Three other inscribed seals of the inner circle exemplify how similar stylistic declarations played out also in animal-contest scenes that lack depictions of royal family members (Collon [1987] 2005: nos. 527–529). We can understand how this Akkadian court glyptic sub-style deployed on high-prestige inscribed seals may have functioned socially within the royal circle by considering the Persepolis Fortification archive.

The Achaemenid Court Style was first defined long ago on the basis of randomly available seals thought to bear close formal affinities to the relief sculptures at Persepolis, which had remained continually visible even before major excavations began in the 1930s. In late twentieth-century scholarship,

John Boardman's (1970a: 305–9) efforts loomed large. As an influential specialist in Greek art, he sought connections between Greek art of the Archaic and Classical periods and the Near East. He assembled large amounts of visual data, serving to acquaint his readership with art of the Achaemenid period. But the problem of dealing with decontextualized data was compounded by terminology that described and stylistically typologized art produced in the empire through the lens of a Greek art connoisseur. Thus, for instance, Boardman could state that “the *Archaic eastern Court Style* is, par excellence, the style of the Persian palaces and in glyptic is expressed on cylinders and conoid stamps” (1970a: 305, emphasis added). Here, “Archaic” derives from Greek art terminology, and “eastern” obviously betrays a western perspective. Viewed from the imperial heartland, this “eastern” place in fact lay both geographically and ideologically at the empire's dead center. Although Boardman (2000: 152–74) subsequently sought to address criticisms of his approach, methodological challenges remained, not substantially rectifying issues addressed by Achaemenid specialists (e.g., Garrison 1991). Distinctions between formal features of line and mass and iconographical features assigned to the Court Style were never clarified. Thus, for instance, figures wearing the Achaemenid court robe, with its wide sleeves and pleated skirt, were often identified as the style's defining feature. Seals displaying all manner of formal qualities might be attached to the Court Style merely because of such iconographical devices or image content that seemed to invoke courtly activity. This elision of subject matter and style exhibited in Boardman's characterizations is, indeed, a core problem in articulations of style in connoisseur-driven studies overall (Shanks 1996: 32).

Garrison's work with the PF tablet seals has identified a set of forms, lines, volumes, spatial/compositional, and iconographical factors that coalesce around a glyptic style attested in the archive, which now furnishes our benchmark for Achaemenid *Court Style*. The results show a restricted style with wide geographical dispersal of a limited number of exemplars, operating on an elite level. This style's formal codes were an agent of prestige and diplomacy, where style as a strictly formal set of attributes becomes in its own right an element of iconography because it signals something specific within a social sphere.

The PF corpus has, furthermore, revealed functional particularities of a major subset of Court Style seals: those inscribed in cuneiform with the royal name in the three languages also deployed in monumental Achaemenid imperial texts (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian). Garrison (2014b) has persuasively argued that these royal-name seals were commissions given as gifts by the king to an elite subgroup of administrative personnel *below* the stratum of royal family members. On PFS 7*, for instance, the crowned royal hero holds at bay two rampant winged bulls (Figure 4.1) (Garrison and Root 2001: cat. 4). He wears the Persian court robe with its elaborate pleats. The

robe is a deliberately flat, ornate, hieratic presence in the composition—bespeaking unruffled power. The creatures he controls, by contrast, are dynamic and robustly modeled. The inscription panel serves as a representational image in its own right, declaring literally the seal’s connection to the prerogatives of royal gifting. Here we gain some potential insight into social functions of the inscribed prestige seals of the Akkadian Empire discussed above, which unfortunately lack any archival framing. The Court Style is, especially in the animal forms, related to but distinct from seals carved in a range of modeled styles found in the archive.



Figure 4.1 Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 7*. Inscribed cylinder seal, carved in Court Style. Pres. h. of image 1.60 cm (almost complete).

Courtesy of M. B. Garrison, M. C. Root, and the Persepolis Seal Project.

Modeled Style(s)

The Modeled Style is an umbrella category covering multiple subgroups that depend on modeled figures with deeply carved forms, which cite, blend, and reinvent stylistic features of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian courtly glyptic. Some unique high-end commissions by royal family members fall into this group. One example is PFS 38, the seal of Darius’s royal wife Irtashduna (Greek Artystone), a daughter of Cyrus the Great (Figure 4.2) (Garrison and Root 2001: cat. 16). Irtashduna’s seal has close ties to Neo-Assyrian Modeled Style seals. But its volumetric masses are puffy rather than bulging and compartmentalized. Expressing a variety of clearly personal preferences, PFS 38 spins a dense web of meaning around the core heroic encounter image, as its voluptuous, soft modeling colludes with abundant Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs that create a lush representational landscape.



Figure 4.2 Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 38. Cylinder seal carved in Modeled Style. Pres. h. of image 1.40 cm (almost complete).

Courtesy of M. B. Garrison, M. C. Root, and the Persepolis Seal Project.

Another example (PFS 16*), remarkably, reflects Neo-Assyrian *palace* sculptures at Nineveh even more strongly than it invokes its glyptic traditions (Figure 4.3) (Garrison 1991: 9–10; Garrison and Root 2001: cat. 22).

Inscribed in Aramaic with the name of its owner, the head administrator of Persepolis and an uncle of Darius, PFS 16* was a new seal Parnaka began to use on a stipulated day in June 500 BCE, when he replaced his earlier seal with this masterpiece. Its date of manufacture is thus certainly some 112 years after the sack of Nineveh. The seal's small size is belied by the physicality of its impressions.



Figure 4.3 (a) Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 16*. Inscribed cylinder seal carved in Modeled Style. Pres. h. of image 1.90 cm (almost complete); (b) Photograph of one impression of PFS 16* on PF Tablet 655 Left Edge.

Courtesy of M. B. Garrison, M. C. Root, and the Persepolis Seal Project.

The phenomenon of courtly discretion at the highest echelons combines in these seals with a workshop arena able to draw upon a deep repertoire of skills and stylistic memory.

The Fortification Style—A Persepolis “Local Style”

Garrison (1988) identified and named a style in the PF archive that represents an astounding 50 percent of the subset of seals displaying images of heroic encounter in the Garrison and Root research corpus. Both the existence and

dominance of this previously unrecognized style produced locally have important implications for understanding Persepolis as a vibrant community fostering a significant population of seal-commissioning individuals (Colburn forthcoming). This was not a “provincial” style in a derogatory sense. The style was developed at the height of the expansionist era of Darius I and, I suggest, came to bespeak the cachet of identification with the thrumming heartland capital of Persepolis.

The Persepolis Fortification Style specializes in rounded but not voluptuously volumetric forms, with smooth uncomplicated surfaces for both human and animal figures. Seals in this style would have been relatively quick to produce given their limited carving into the stone to produce muscle definition. Yet the figures are often lively and imaginative, with rhythmic, open compositional structures that tend to leave room for inserting an idiosyncratic motif at the request of a consumer who wanted something special added to a more or less stock motif. Before Parnaka began using PFS 16* (see [Figure 4.3](#)), he used PFS 9*, carved in the Fortification Style ([Figure 4.4a](#)) (Garrison and Root 2001: cat. 288). In this lively composition a hero in Assyrian dress grasps a high-stepping ostrich by its neck; a rampant wild goat attaches itself to the hero’s back as if to join the fray, but turns its head away. Interspersed in the negative spaces are astral symbols and Parnaka’s name inscribed in Aramaic (between hero and ostrich). The smooth fluid forms of the figures within their energized compositional field illustrate the style’s capacity to exploit the cylindrical seal format to create tightly interacting figures when rolled out on tablets.

(a)



(b)

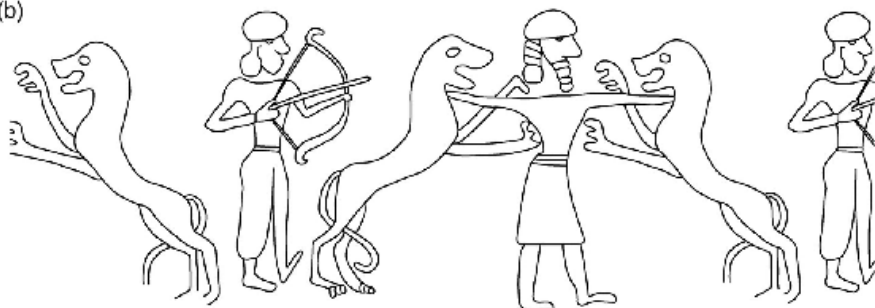


Figure 4.4 (a) Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 9*. Inscribed cylinder seal carved in Fortification Style. Pres. h. of image 1.30 cm (complete); (b) Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 49. Cylinder seal carved in Fortification Style. Pres. h. of image 1.90 cm (complete).

Courtesy of M. B. Garrison, M. C. Root, and the Persepolis Seal Project.

This example shows that the Fortification Style was not by definition a low-status commodity. Seals like Parnaka's PFS 9* may have been produced in beautiful hard stones with particularly elaborate fittings that carried added prestige value. Nevertheless, Parnaka's ownership of this seal in the Fortification Style does lend special interest to the fact that many individuals of much lesser stature also used seals carved in this style. Ishbaramishtima, a professional guide who shepherded elite personages back and forth across the empire, owned PFS 49 ([Figure 4.4b](#)) (Garrison and Root 2001: cat. 23). The seal appears in multiple impressions, on documents registering his receipt of foodstuffs from royal stores. It manifests classic Fortification Style. The insertion of the archer figure within the heroic scene, perhaps meant to advertise Ishbaramishtima's role as protector of his clients on difficult journeys, personalizes it. He used this seal en route from Persepolis all the way to India. Presumably his seal was impressed onto documents at other way stations as he procured supplies for his party far beyond the Persepolis administrative region. In this way, the local style resonated globally across the empire.

Characterizing the qualities of the Fortification Style, and considering the implications of its reach via usage by well-traveled individuals, leads us to ponder the effects of this style on seal production outside the Iranian heartland. Numerous stamp seals of pyramidal shape, with a hexagonally or octagonally faceted seal face, have traditionally been considered hallmarks of Greek-influenced arts of the empire in western Anatolia (Boardman 1970b). This seal category, frequently dubbed "Graeco-Persian," includes masses of unprovenanced examples, which cannot serve as baselines for analysis. The Fortification Style may have contributed forcefully to consumer interest in the look so often called "Graeco-Persian." The smooth, supple figural forms traditionally associated with a Greek aesthetic are, as we have noted, a key feature of the Fortification Style (Root 1998). Underpinning the legacy of analytical burdens surrounding "Graeco-Persian" is the lingering conviction that Greek glyptic art was by definition naturalistic (and high quality), in opposition to a supposed Persian predilection for, or capacity limited to (lesser-quality, crude) abstraction (Gates 2002).

Imperial Style(s)/Hegemonic Style(s)

Other categories of seals, known from multiple excavated contexts, play off

the iconography and some stylistic features of Court Style and Modeled Style seals as we can track these features in the PF archive and across the empire. E. R. M. Dusinberre has used the term *Imperial Style* to characterize this bundling of attributes, specifically to label Achaemenid-period cylinder seals excavated at Sardis (Dusinberre 1997; 2003: 159–64) and Gordion (Dusinberre 2005: cat. 33); a sealing from Memphis in Egypt (Colburn 2014: 109–14, fig. 2.12); and PFS comparanda (Dusinberre 2005: 53–54, for iconographical elements). These seals may come closest to the concept of the Late Bronze Age “international style” discussed earlier. *Imperial Style* is more a notional style than a grouping of seals around a closely defined set of formal attributes. The sharing of traits is fluid. It suggests a broad acquaintance with artistic currents across the imperial landscape. An assemblage of seal impressions and impressions of details from metalware discovered in an Achaemenid-era grave at Ur, plausibly belonging to a seal carver, shows how artistic impulses might transfer and cross-pollinate across the vast empire from the vantage point of workshop practicalities (Collon 1996). Moreover, ongoing analyses of seal *use* through the PF tablets keeps reaffirming the vibrancy of coexisting styles in this multicultural creative environment (Root 1997).

On archaeological grounds, we would be justified in including under the Imperial Style umbrella a distinctive group of seals that bear no visible tie to the Persepolis Court Style. Many seals, both stamps and cylinders, continued to be made in the Achaemenid Empire after the fashion of Neo-Babylonian seals of both the Modeled Style and the Cut and Drilled Style, which display a worshiper before Babylonian cult symbols or apparatus. Many are recorded both in the PF corpus (Root 1998, 2003) and in a remarkable range of archaeological or archival contexts across the empire, from Taxila in the east to Macedonia in the west. Anatolian contexts alone have yielded their share, for example from Gordion (Dusinberre 2005: cat. 38), Sardis (Dusinberre 2003: fig. 95), and Daskyleion (Kaptan 2002: 3 [DS 1]). This group’s combined stylistic and iconographical attributes in both stylistic variants seem to have propelled them in Achaemenid times into coveted objects. To some extent, their status may reflect the particular stones used to carve them. Many of the Cut and Drilled Style seals preserved as artifacts were fashioned from translucent blue chalcedonies, which were a semiprecious commodity, difficult to carve, and suggestive of mystical qualities, belying any notion that minimalistic carving style equates with a low-status object (Root 2003). For some constellation of reasons, seals in this style came to signify a special connectivity within the empire—and to represent it globally. Their distribution implies a resonance with elites across the empire that is much more subtle than a direct and explicit visual statement of kinship with Achaemenid palatial art. The circumstances that brought a new salience in Achaemenid times to seals displaying Babylonian worship scenes, especially in the minimalist Cut and Drilled Style, served to maintain and even enhance

the cultural aura of this Neo-Babylonian stylistic tradition into the post-Achaemenid Seleucid era (e.g., Invernizzi [1994](#)).

Elamite Styles

Evidence from the PF tablets illuminates relationships with seal styles immediately before the Achaemenid period, when Elam was in conflict with Assyria, devastated by its invasions, and then witnessed that empire's demise. At the time, Persians were in a lively phase of acculturation and comingling with Elamites in southwestern Iran. Several seals in the PF corpus were royal heirlooms commissioned in the Late Neo-Elamite (and Perso-Elamite) environment and passed on for continuing use in Achaemenid Persepolis. The most famous is a cylinder inscribed with the name and titulary of Cyrus I of Anshan (ancestor of Cyrus the Great, founder of the empire). Another of particular interest is a Late Neo-Elamite heirloom cylinder used in Persepolis by Irdabama, one of the royal wives of Darius (Garrison [2002](#), [2011](#)). Both examples show lively spacious compositions complemented by smooth figural surfaces—features that clearly inform what becomes the local Fortification Style of Persepolis discussed above.

The Seal Carver's Hand

The study of workshops and how artists in different contexts may have operated within their embrace threads through the study of art across time (Di Paoli [2014](#)). In his exploration of the Fortification Style in the PF archive, Garrison isolated multiple notional workshops in which artisans must have worked in close collaborative proximity—likely with shared apparatus, ideas, and clients. Within this production environment he was able further to identify sets of seals that by any standard of Morellian analysis should be considered works by the same individual. At an early stage, Garrison ([1996](#): 39) had distinguished some thirty-five distinct artists' hands; the number continues to grow. One example is a pair from a larger set of cylinder seals using representational motifs by the hand Garrison has dubbed the Artist of the Pendant Robe, who produced seals primarily for offices of the Persepolis regional food-disbursement authority (Garrison [1996](#): 39–42). PFS 95 ([Figure 4.5a](#)) (Garrison and Root [2001](#): cat. 25) is one of several by this artist that experiment with rendering the elaborately pleated Persian court robe on seals otherwise adhering to mainstream features of the simple, unfussy Fortification Style. Garrison sees this subgroup of the artist's production moving deliberately toward the Court Style. PFS 118 ([Figure 4.5b](#)) (Garrison [2000](#): fig. 16; Garrison, Root, and Colburn forthcoming) is an archer scene, whose protagonist is a scorpion-man. Although the figure does not wear a robe, the

rampant lion on PFS 118, compared with that on PFS 95, is one of numerous diagnostic features of linked attribution.

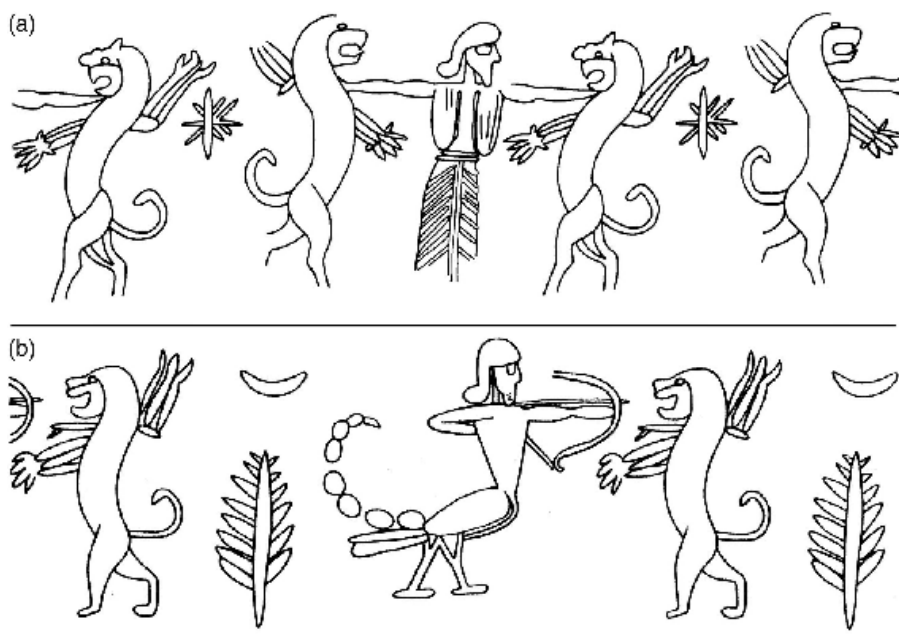


Figure 4.5 (a) Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 95. Cylinder seal carved in Fortification Style. Pres. h. of image 1.60 cm (almost complete); (b) Composite line drawing from impressions of PFS 118. Cylinder seal carved in Fortification Style. Pres. h. of image 1.80 cm (complete).

Courtesy of M. B. Garrison, M. C. Root, and the Persepolis Seal Project.

Energetic debates on the pros and cons of attribution analyses with respect to first-millennium Levantine ivory workshops have continued over decades (Herrmann 2005; Winter 2005). The large and contextualized data samples of the PF corpus enable us better to appreciate possibilities of what those art-making settings may have offered in complex socio-political environments of “global” reach.

Conclusion

The case studies drawn from the Persepolis Fortification archive demonstrate the capacities of analyzing artistic production within a large sample to enlighten us on what stylistic taxonomies can do to aid research in the twenty-first century. At the same time, they reveal intricacies of the lived experiences of stylistic behaviors in multicultural ancient environments.

One exciting feature of this analysis lies in discerning discrete networks of seal makers and owners through fine-grained stylistic determinations leading to the level of attribution analysis, within a sample where data on the seal owners can be integrated with data on seal carver attribution. What a few decades ago was often dismissed as an outmoded pastime of connoisseurs has reemerged as a way into social history, at the interface of the ancient artist, the consumer, and the vast social networks of both. Style truly emerges here as a form of social practice (Feldman 2014: 58–67, on this concept).

Clearly, both the word style and the concept of style need continually to be renegotiated with transparency in mind. When this happens, the two remain useful and even indispensable tools of analysis.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Useful edited volumes on style include Conkey and Hastorf 1990, offering perspectives from a range of archaeological spheres; and Lang (1979) 1987, with thought-provoking discussions by specialists from multiple disciplines and cultural horizons.

With special reference to the ancient Near East, Collon (1987) 2005 surveys Mesopotamian cylinder seals, beginning with a chronological presentation based on canonical taxonomies of style. Garrison 2014a is a well-illustrated discussion of seals applied to documents of the Persepolis Fortification archive, examining administrative and social features of the archive, its seal-using personalities, and how seal styles intersect with these factors.

Schapiro (1953) 1962 is a lucidly written “must-read” from a distinguished art historian, whose contemplations continue to prompt fresh reflection.

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NOTES

- 1 Alpers (1979) 1987, commenting as a historian of early modern European art; Donohue 2005: 1–19, on Greek sculpture; Gunter 2009: esp. 106–17, on the Neo-Assyrian sphere.
- 2 See Winter 1998, for ancient Near Eastern studies; Dietler 2010, on things as agents in colonialist encounters; and Hodder 2012 on archaeological entanglement and thing theory.
- 3 I use *artist* and *artisan* interchangeably, but I understand that ancient Near Eastern artists operated in craft environments that seldom, if ever, privileged an individual practitioner of a skilled craft as an "artist" who was a celebrity figure in any early modern or modern sense. For a sensitive contemplation of the historiography of the artist in Near Eastern art, see Gunter 1990.
- 4 Winter 1996: figs. 1–3: Stele of Naram-Sin. Collon (1987) 2005: no. 641: BM 89137: seal of Kalki, scribe of Ubil-Eshtar the king's brother (Collon 1982: no. 141); Collon (1987) 2005: no. 530: BM, now lost: seal of Aman-Eshtar, maidservant of the princess Tutanapshum, daughter of Naram-Sin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Connoisseurship and Classification

Eleonora Pappalardo

Introduction: Issues of Terminology

Art is commonly conceived as an aesthetic expression of creativity, individual or collective. It is naturally connected with human experience, possessing the power to convey emotions and messages to the observer. For the ancient world, particularly the Near East, it is not always possible to apply modern cognitive and interpretive categories to objects with aesthetic value. What we now define as “art” was differently conceived in antiquity. In this respect, we can draw a fundamental distinction between *art* and *artistic industry*, the latter designating a serial production of objects characterized by figurative properties (Bianchi Bandinelli 1950). The main difficulties for studies of connoisseurship and classification lie in this different conception of art in antiquity.

We have substantial evidence that Greek art was already critically viewed in antiquity. Technical details, use of color, proportions, facial expressions, and movement, for example, were occasionally critically appreciated, and the authors of specific works of art were celebrated, especially when their creations seemed to reproduce reality (Tanner 2006; Steiner 2014). For ancient Greece and Rome, texts document the reasoned interpretation of works of art both from philological-stylistic and moral perspectives, possibly connected with judgments of authenticity (connoisseurship): an awareness of the making of art. For the ancient Near East we lack a comparably rich corpus of textual evidence for similar practices, but surviving documents hint at visual and material codification of images and monuments. A letter to the Neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (721–705 BCE) suggests the practice of connoisseurship, by which the author questions an object’s authenticity on the basis of extensive visual inspection. “The seal (impression) that he brought is not made like the seals of the king, my lord. I have in my possession a thousand seal(ed orders)s of the king, my lord. I compared it with them, and [it] was not made like the seal of the king, my lord” (Fuchs and Parpola 2001: no. 125). Yet the notion of disinterestedly contemplating a work of art as such was apparently lacking, a fact that probably encouraged scholarship in Near Eastern art history to avoid an explicitly critical approach. Different approaches to the study of figural works derive from different notions about figural works in antiquity. Perhaps for this reason, as late as the mid-twentieth

century, Henri Frankfort could declare that a history of the art of the ancient Near East had not yet been written ([1954] 1996: 11).

Only recently have scholars begun to consider ancient Near Eastern “aesthetics” from a critical art historical perspective, arguing that “the general sense of the term [aesthetics] as an analytical tool for probing the affective properties of works we call art can be made to bridge the distances of culture, time, and space that separate us from the ancient Mesopotamians” (Winter 2002: 3; see also Winter 2003). The need to develop new categories for studying Near Eastern aesthetics—distinct from “Western” ones that are primarily based on the object outside its functional context—has encouraged efforts critically to approach and classify a tradition of figural production that lasted over three thousand years. Near Eastern visual arts can be defined as “any work that is imaginatively conceptualized and that affords visual and emotional satisfaction, for which manufacturing skill is required and to which some established standards have been applied” (Winter 1995: 2570).

Thus the systematic application of methods of connoisseurship and classification to ancient Near Eastern artistic production should provide important tools for analysis and historical reconstruction. The complex political vicissitudes of those regions brought about the movement of many objects, especially luxury goods. As a result, numerous objects have been found far from their original locus of production, in chronologically and culturally foreign contexts. In these cases, a rigorous internal analysis, together with systematic comparisons with similar works, form the basis for classifying the objects themselves. Examples of ivories, seals, and sculptures are discussed below.

Another important issue concerns authenticity. Scholars of ancient art have long been indiscriminate in the study of objects that were presumed to be old, but whose archaeological provenance was dubious or unknown. This attitude was particularly common in the study of ancient Near Eastern art because “as long as there are people who collect antiquities, there will also be people who forge antiquity” (Muscarella 2000: 12). Detailed knowledge of stylistic patterns and details—that is, connoisseurship—thus becomes fundamental in reconstructing specific iconographic features and motifs and placing each object with a specific repertoire (Muscarella 2014: 39). One well-studied case concerns the statues of the ruler Gudea of Lagash (ca. 2100 BCE) (see Figure 16.2 in Suter, this volume). Seated or standing statues, and heads, have been recovered from excavations chiefly at Tello (ancient Girsu). Other specimens appeared on the art market, prompting questions of authenticity. In addition to analyzing the cuneiform text on inscribed statues, scholars have sought to distinguish original from forged works through visual inspection of technical features and details of carving: material, dimensions, location of the inscription in relation to dress, hands and feet, and in the case of heads, the shape of eyes, ears, mouth, and other facial features (Johansen 1978: 32–38;

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“The essential goal of art-historical connoisseurship is to establish so far as possible the work-identifying facts of production (who? when? where?)” (Brown 2008: 138). Yet other aspects connected with the object’s production, including purpose or cause, should not in theory be excluded as possibly useful to achieving the main goal. The process of attributing a work of art to a specific individual, culture, or period must include several kinds of requisites or, better, requisite-clusters. Style, subject matter, tools, materials, facture, labels, documents, and so on, must be involved in any process of attribution and classification, or at least must not a priori be excluded. The exercise in detecting or distinguishing what possesses some properties not possessed by something produced at other times or places can, nevertheless, result in a negative.

A work of classification and connoisseurship should consider principles based on the assumption that there is no type of property that may not satisfy the uniqueness condition. That is, what may be unique for a given work (or class of works) can only be analyzed in relation to other features. That is why uniqueness is a relative rather than an intrinsic property. “No item is evidential of anything in the abstract, by itself, but only in the context of the total system of knowledge”: texts, history, etc. (Brown 2008: 144). The context, the natural domain for practicing connoisseurship, then classification, is also fundamental for determining social practices affecting the production, collecting, display, recording, and preservation of artworks: such practices are the means through which documentary evidence comes into the public domain. In general, artistic production is thus closely tied to categories of technical and aesthetic competence and preference, and by the opportunities the social context affords. It is also deeply connected with local circumstances and so rooted in local meanings that “we may draw our interpretive circles ever wider without reaching a point where it would be natural to stop” (Corbey, Layton, and Tanner 2004: 361).

Establishing authorship, date, and culture is effectively a process of elimination, ruling out specific features from more to less macroscopic. In the case of Near Eastern art, examples might include the presence or absence of the “flame” carved on the backs of animals among ivories of the “flame and frond school” (Herrmann 1989), or the peculiar treatment of crowns and scales characterizing the figures of the “crown and scale group” (Herrmann 1992: 32–33; Winter 1998: 57–59). Thus exploring all available partial identifiers is fundamental: physical evidence; iconographic evidence (what Erwin Panofsky called pre-iconographical subject matter); manifest evidence

of carving, drawing, or sculptural skill; documentation; evidence from social history; and anything else that might possibly be relevant (Panofsky 1955). Any partial identifier can help make a conclusive case for a given attribution. Similarly, any partial identifier may refute an otherwise plausible case for a proposed attribution. The obvious consequence of this approach is that until one has checked all possible partial identifiers, one cannot a priori state whether the work bears a specific characteristic or property incompatible with the identification that other identifiers seem to support (Brown 2008: 143–44).

Moreover, every undertaking in connoisseurship or classification should be preceded by a careful examination of the objects one wishes to analyze. A rigorous sampling of the features constituting an artifact must be made, and all recurring and variable elements recorded (Herrmann 1992: 2–4). Unquestionably, this classificatory process is more easily achieved with homogeneous groups of materials: a set of typologically similar objects whose common function and use can be reconstructed, are made of the same material, and satisfy the same kind of consumer. Studies in connoisseurship and classification are comparatively recent in approaches to ancient Near Eastern art. The extent and variety of regions included within “the ancient Near East” determined the production and consumption of an enormous and heterogeneous number of objects.

Among the large quantities of artifacts that could be investigated from an art historical perspective, those best suited to this kind of approach are seals and seal impressions, figured ivories, and carved stone reliefs. These are all classes of material whose production continued over a long period and for which we can trace a sequence of development, perceiving what persists and what, by contrast, changes in subject matter and style. Yet sometimes style itself can represent a conscious form of representation or communication: a way of doing things can be used as a means to convey specific messages about different kinds of identity (individual, collective, political, ideological, religious). In this context, it would be more appropriate to define different levels of style by stressing the crucial difference between conscious and unconscious, better to conduct detailed analyses aimed at identifying the producer, place of production, and date of a work (Pappalardo 2006, 2010). While Lewis Binford (1962, 1965, 1972) distinguished style and function, James Sackett (1977: 371; 1986: 268) importantly rejected the traditional division; he maintained instead that form and function are almost symbiotically conceived. Spatial and temporal continuity in stylistic variation has thus been explained in terms of “cultural tradition” (Jones 1997: 112), and regarded as some sort of passive product of ethnicity.

As noted earlier, for the most part studies have aimed at analyzing the development and change over time of discrete categories of Near Eastern art, such as reliefs, glyptic, and ivories. These studies made it possible to distinguish the artistic production of particular geographical regions from one

another, such as Syria, Mesopotamia, Urartu, and Iran, in terms of cultures or traditions.

Connoisseurship, Classification, and Style: Passive Reflection of Normative Rules to Means of Active Communication and Information Exchange

A concept of style intended as an active form of communication and, to a certain degree, social marking, is a relatively recent notion.¹ Starting from this assumption, the distinction between style and iconography takes on a substantial meaning, iconography being more easily reproduced or copied than style. Deliberately reproducing a given style can acquire a particular significance, an explicit intent to embody a precise “way of doing things.” In effect, underlying the processes of classification and connoisseurship is the assumption that artifacts can be compared with one another (through similarities and differences) by bearing those elements that hopefully are useful for locating them in a precise temporal and spatial context. In this respect, the first cognitive category consists in recognizing a “self” as differentiated from “others” (ingroup versus outgroup) (Wiessner 1983: 191–92).

As style can be used as an active form of communication, it can be manipulated, like iconography, to convey information according to a specific requirement of self-representation. In this respect, the concept of different levels of style becomes more prominent and a significant assumption in connoisseurship and classification: style can, in fact, be manipulated to a certain degree, until it is the result of a conscious choice in “doing things.” Thus if we include in the category of “style” features such as the distribution of figures in space, their relationship to one another, or their external proportions, this level of style is reproducible (Winter 2005: 31–32). In this case, style assumes an explicit role, like iconography. It is clear, then, that these features cannot be sufficient in applying criteria of connoisseurship.

Nevertheless, when style coincides with an individual hand, then unconscious principles come into play. The practice of investigating the *unconscious signature* of the artist through analysis of features not shaped by external influences, but merely reflecting an individual’s natural way of acting, has played a significant role in Western art history. Giovanni Morelli (1892–93), who examined micro-details in works of art in order to find those features that belonged to only one “person,” most famously exemplifies this approach. J. D. Beazley (1951) adopted a similar model in his comprehensive studies of Attic Greek pottery, analyzing single occurrences or repetitions among the figures depicted on red- and black-figure vases. The particular manner of

rendering a hand, ear, hair, and the relationships between body parts or facial features, were all included in a broad-spectrum process of connoisseurship and classification whose origin, with reference to Greek art, can in a certain sense be traced to the pioneering work of J. J. Winckelmann. As noted earlier, Irene Winter (2005) made an important contribution to ancient Near Eastern art history by emphasizing the need for systematic methodological criteria and terminology in distinguishing hands, workshops, regions, and areas, with special reference to ivorycarving.

Cases of Connoisseurship and Classification in Near Eastern Art History

In general, an apparent dichotomy seems to characterize the figural art of the ancient Near East. On the one hand, the region's broad geographical extent, together with the nature and morphology of its physical boundaries, allowed the formation of regional patterns of representation and, in some cases, an evident conservatism in certain forms and schemes. On the other hand, boundaries were also conceived as "bridges," permeable passageways allowing continuous exchanges of elements among different cultures. Mesopotamian art, for example, could be considered in a certain sense *canonical*, built upon precise concepts governed by formulas and systems of representation. Individual creativity is secondary to a core conception of figural production: the artist is celebrated because, through his skill, he contributes substantially to preserving continuity for the work of art over time, applying rules and codes experimented with over long periods (Gunter 1990). Thus it is possible to distinguish an Assyrian from a North Syrian work of art.

In her call to establish explicit methodological and terminological criteria for studying and classifying objects with aesthetic value, Irene Winter (2005: 25–27) cited Morelli's work as a pioneering attempt to identify groups and boundaries through objectively defined criteria. Shifting those principles usually linked with art criticism and associated with individual moods and emotions, Winter argued that an objective analysis of selected internal and external features—proportions of facial details, relationships between open and filled spaces—could shed light on an artist's unconscious signature. These features are obviously placed in the service of broader representational principles. From the combination of small features (unconscious) into a specific iconographic context that respects particular schemes of distributing the figures, we can shift from the individual to the workshop. Thus there will be features shared by several artifacts, as signs of a common choice (or need) to represent something, along with features that are present on only one or a few objects, which probably represent an individual hand. These methodological principles, developed for analyzing carved ivories, could be

applied to other categories of art, in particular large groups of homogeneous artifacts: seals and seal impressions, figurines, and reliefs.

What must be kept in mind is that style continually changes. It is customary to recognize in ancient Greek art a development in naturalistic representation from Archaic to Early Classical to Classical. Different concepts of art in the ancient Near East prescribed different criteria for stylistic change. Images had a strong communicative power and became an important means of conveying messages in serving the ruling ideology. This concept must underlie any attempt at analysis, criticism, connoisseurship, and classification. The distribution of figures in space, their proportions, details, and reciprocal relationships could be determined by a particular will or need, intended as a conventional way of representation, and not necessarily resulting from a *natural* development of the style.

Ivories of the Early First Millennium BCE

Underlying the potential for applying criteria of connoisseurship and classification are some unavoidable basic points. Grouping works of art requires fixed categories based substantially on detecting discrete elements, which must be recurrent or absent. So a necessary first step is to define and recognize these elements.

Carved ivories of the early first millennium have been the focus of multiple studies, chiefly aimed at their classification ([Figure 5.1](#); see also [Figures 24.2](#) and [24.3](#) in Whitley, this volume). Issues of provenance and attribution arose with their initial discovery in the mid-nineteenth century. Since objects decorated with carved ivory were considered luxury goods, they have been found in multiple contexts: as items of trade or booty, or as royal commissions (in the case of those in Assyrian style). Carved ivories form a consistent body of material, typologically homogeneous but iconographically and stylistically varied among the different traditions and cultures that produced them.

Frederik Poulsen ([1912](#)) sought to distinguish the main traditions of ivorycarving, Syrian and Phoenician, among works recovered from a wide area of the Mediterranean world. Analyzing the examples William Loftus discovered in 1854 in the Burnt Palace at Nimrud, Poulsen identified as distinctive of the Syrian group a lack of Egyptianizing features, which instead characterized the Phoenician style, represented among the specimens that Austen Henry Layard recovered in 1848–49 from a building on the opposite side of the mound, the Northwest Palace. The chief difference between these clusters thus consisted in the absence of Egyptianizing features in the Syrian group and their abundant presence in the Phoenician one. The Syrian group was also defined by comparisons with monumental reliefs found in the major centers of northern Syria, such as Carchemish, Zincirli, Maraş, and Tell Halaf

(Poulsen 1912: 38–53). R. D. Barnett (1957, 1982) further elaborated the distinctions between these two groups of ivories, detecting within the Syrian group Hittite and Hurrian elements inherited from second-millennium artistic production. Moreover, according to Barnett, the peculiar characteristics of some human faces, such as the oval face, high forehead, wide eyes and nose, and small chin and mouth, were generally similar throughout the artistic production of northern Syria, so that one could speak of an apparent “regional conventionalism” in representing facial features.



Figure 5.1 Furniture panel with winged, human-headed sphinx. Nimrud, Fort Shalmaneser SW 37. Ivory; 6.6 × 10.3 cm. ND 10342.

Source: Stuart Laidlaw. Courtesy of Nimrud Photo Archive.

The renewed excavations at Nimrud directed by M. E. L. Mallowan (1966) yielded considerable additional material with which to examine and classify the ivories. In 1975, the Iraqi Ministry of Culture conducted further excavations and uncovered the famous examples from the AJ Well (Safar and al-Iraqi 1987). Although carved ivories have been recovered from multiple sites scattered across the Near East, including Hasanlu, Khorsabad, Tell Halaf, Arslan Taş, Zincirli, Hamath, Samaria, and Til Barsib (Pappalardo 2006: 62–63), those recovered from the excavations at Fort Shalmaneser in Nimrud form a corpus so typologically and iconographically broad that they allow an exhaustive study of ivorycarving in the early first millennium. Publication of Mallowan’s excavations was followed by a series of volumes (*Ivories from Nimrud*) devoted to different aspects and criteria for grouping. The first volume assembles specimens characterized by type (Orchard 1967); the second is based on stylistic criteria (Mallowan and Davies 1970). The third

and fourth volumes publish examples from particular find-contexts, grouping artifacts found in two large rooms of the southwest area of Fort Shalmaneser (Mallowan and Herrmann 1974; Herrmann 1986). Volume 5 treats the ivories (509 in all) found in several minor rooms of the fort, of different style and iconography (Herrmann 1992). Volume 6 collects the ivories from the Northwest Palace (Herrmann, Laidlaw, and Coffey 2009), and the final volume describes examples found in rooms SW11/12 and T10 of Fort Shalmaneser (Herrmann and Laidlaw 2013). Meanwhile, specific or synthetic studies have analyzed selected issues and problems engendered by such a broad range of richly decorated material, focusing on matters of style, chronology, and techniques of manufacture.²

Following the initial distinction between two ivorycarving traditions, a third group was added. The “South Syrian” style, alternatively called the “Intermediate” group or tradition, shares features with the two main groups: Egyptian elements are present, but rendered in a heavy style (Winter 1981a, 1998; Herrmann 1992). Thus, from an iconographic perspective Egyptian subjects dominate this category, whereas the style—composition, organization, use of space, figural proportions—recalls the North Syrian tradition. Finally, an independent production is represented by the specimens in Assyrian style, which are easily recognizable because they explicitly draw on the subjects and styles of Neo-Assyrian art (Mallowan and Davies 1970).

These catalogues of figured ivories comprise a first step in classification and connoisseurship: they recognized macro distinctive elements within a large quantity of homogeneous material. A careful iconographic and stylistic analysis yielded a preliminary arrangement of the objects into groups and sets, which Georgina Herrmann (1989, 1992) designated “style groups.” It is precisely in the context of this scholarship that the need for solid and consistent terminology arises, along with a clear distinction between “style” and “iconography.” In the case of the ivories, the main difficulty consists in reconstructing production centers, workshops, and, finally, hands. The use of the term “tradition” for the macro classification of ivorycarving (North Syrian, Assyrian, Phoenician) could clash with concepts of presumed temporal continuity in stylistic variation, regarded as some sort of “passive product of ethnicity” (Jones 1997: 112). As noted earlier, recent scholarship has stressed instead that the relations between normative traditions and aesthetic categories (such as style) are often complex, because stylistic patterns can vary at several levels, creating a kind of pyramidal variation that, in turn, results from a “stroboscopic” range of variables (Plog 1978, 1983). What we generically consider style can be subdivided into several levels. Borrowing approaches developed in studies of Western art to develop a consistent and common method, Irene Winter (2005) has thoughtfully constructed a preliminary framework for establishing precise categories related to works of art: hand, workshop, locale, region, and period.

Studies in connoisseurship may reasonably seek generally applicable identifiers. And identifiers that are generally applicable to particular classes of works can usually be found, just as Morelli posited discrete identifiers for Italian Renaissance paintings. The identifying properties are often highly complex property-clusters: really conjunctive properties, where a feature can be the union or the intersection of features shared by other works (Pappalardo 2008). The constituent properties taken together narrow the possibilities of origin to a given time, place, or creator. These are the properties cited in an art historian's argument for a particular attribution (Brown 2008: 143). The group of ivories within the North Syrian tradition labeled the "flame and frond school" (Herrmann 1989), for example, can be considered a micro-scale phenomenon of wider sharing of features. In this respect, two different explanations for its origin illustrate the multiple variables that come into play in studying visual phenomena. In Georgina Herrmann's view this group was produced at the site of Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana), because the flame motif also occurs on several examples of large-scale stone sculpture recovered from that site. She postulated further that the motif originated in large-scale sculptures and was then transferred to the small-scale ivories. Other scholars have suggested instead that portable works like the ivories are more likely to be the media through which iconographies are transferred (Winter 1989). This kind of problem in interpretation and attribution commonly arises when studying "traveling" objects. In such cases, all information the general context provides must be considered in pursuing studies in connoisseurship and classification. This need is even greater when the objects are found in a context *unquestionably* different from the original one (Feldman 2006: 1–13).

A View from Abroad

What characterizes an object of aesthetic value, in addition to typology, are iconography (subject matter) and style (way of rendering the subject). Both these elements become the focus of an analysis aimed at connoisseurship and classification: the iconography usually bears the explicit meaning, the style the unconscious features concerning individuals (or groups). In some cases, however, the subject matter would be insufficient to symbolize ownership or membership. It could be that style in itself becomes a tool of identification, through specific features whose peculiarities prompt an immediate association between a way of doing things and an agent. In this case, surely one of the most interesting and intriguing, the adoption of a figural pattern follows more than one path.

As noted above, the practice of connoisseurship and classification requires an a priori distinction among macro areas of production. The early first-millennium Mediterranean world provides a good laboratory for trying to

understand problems of attribution based on presence/absence of discrete iconographic and stylistic elements. The case of Crete is exemplary. From the end of the eleventh century BCE, contacts between the Aegean and Near East resumed following the Mycenaean collapse at the end of the Late Bronze Age. In the ninth to eighth centuries, Crete became a privileged trading post in the Mediterranean exchange network (Pappalardo 2012). A large number of Near Eastern imports testifies to the island's active role in the network of interregional interconnections. Meanwhile, a local production in bronze, ivory, pottery, and faience closely imitating Near Eastern prototypes characterizes Cretan material culture on several levels (Hoffmann 1997). The presence in Iron Age Crete both of imports and good imitations of Near Eastern models has shaped scholarly discussions, which are chiefly concerned with identifying imports, specifying their foreign sources, and demonstrating the presence of immigrant artisans.

One of the most famous and frequently discussed objects from Crete provides a fine example of the complex issues regarding *Orientalia* found far from the Near East and their impact on Greek art (Pappalardo 2001, 2004, 2011; Gunter 2009). A bronze tympanum recovered from the Idaean Cave is a circular object depicting in relief a central male figure, who places his foot on a bull (Kunze 1931: no. 74) (Figure 5.2). On both sides, winged genii beat cymbals and face the central figure. Along the rim is engraved a festoon of lotus buds; at the center, just at the head of the main figure, is a larger, more elaborate vegetal motif. All the figures are represented in a Near Eastern—specifically Assyrian—manner: dress, hairstyle, and pose (the central figure with his foot placed on the bull, for example). Yet the subject of the decoration is certainly Greek, or better, Cretan. It appears to represent the famous story of the birth of Zeus as told by Hesiod: the winged genii would represent two Kuretes beating cymbals in order to drown out the cries of the infant deity. It remains to be explained why the artist adopted a Near Eastern figurative style. If we assume that the object was produced in Crete to celebrate a local theme, perhaps its style could be explained by the craftsman's ethnicity or region of origin. Alternatively, perhaps a local artisan produced the tympanum under the supervision of Near Eastern colleagues; or, again, perhaps the Cretan bronzeworker simply copied an available Near Eastern prototype (Hoffmann 2005: 358).



Figure 5.2 Tympanum decorated with heroic figure. Crete, Idaeon Cave; ninth century BCE. Bronze; dia. 55 cm. Heraklion Museum X9.

Image © Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Sports, Archaeological Receipts Fund. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource NY.

The mixture of styles characterizing the bronze tympanum and many other examples of Iron Age Cretan production (Pappalardo 2011) could fit within the concept of an “international style” recently reexamined by Marian Feldman (2006). It remains to understand (or define) whether one style—intended as a general way of doing things, including discrete iconographic and formal choices—once adopted in a new cultural domain and naturally absorbing features endemic to that region, can be still defined as “international,” or whether it instead acquires the status of a pure style. That is to say, in ninth-century Crete an expansive figural production whose main characteristic was the combination of local and “Oriental” features was an integral part of the material culture. This production involves a large and heterogeneous range of objects made from different materials: ivory, bronze, faience, pottery, iron, and stone. Mixing elements of different cultural origin

is not necessarily explained as the spontaneous outcome of the meeting of two different traditions. Indeed, the choice to use discrete iconographic units in decorating the bronze tympanum from the Idaean Cave—or any other artifact—was perhaps dictated by an explicit intent to render more successfully the Greek myth. If so, then every style, even when it results from the mixing of elements from different cultures, once rooted in a specific cultural domain itself becomes a natural expression of that domain.

Glyptic

Although glyptic constitutes a homogeneous corpus of objects with specific aesthetic characteristics, it has primarily been considered for its communicative role. Including seals in this discussion of classification obviously cannot disregard their innate connection with writing and administration: “seals are markers of a self-conscious system of recording and preserving information that worked together with writing and other communication techniques” (Feldman 2007: 310). The cylinder seal appeared during the Late Uruk period (3500–3000 BCE) and continued until the end of the first millennium. Mesopotamian cylinder seals furnish a privileged laboratory for tracing the development of a specific artistic form, perpetually at the service of precise functional purposes. The invention of cylinder seals is closely linked with the elaboration of an iconographic repertoire (Amiet 1961). The rich variety of styles and subjects, along with their typological and functional homogeneity, allow us to detect subtle variations in iconography and style.

Like the first-millennium ivories, seals too were linked in a certain sense with major sculptures produced at the same time and in the same regions, sharing both iconographic and stylistic features. One famous example is the similarity in structure and conception between the Lion Hunt Stele from Uruk (see Figure 12.1 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume) and contemporaneous cylinder seals (Amiet 1961: fig. 611). Unlike the carved ivories discussed earlier, however, seals must be read in parallel not only with large-scale sculpture, but also with texts. They represent explicit evidence for the abiding Near Eastern dialogue between image and writing, perhaps due in part to the fact that the formal construction of the cuneiform script resulted from the stylization of ancient pictograms (Bahrani 2003: 98–120).

Henri Frankfort’s (1939) classic study on the classification of cylinder seals remains an important reference for Mesopotamian glyptic (see also Collon [1987] 2005). The nature of these objects has shaped scholarly approaches to their analysis. As objects conveying visual value, seals must be considered media for which images and meanings cannot be separated, because here the subjects represented take the place of style (Pittman 1994; Bahrani 2003). At

the same time, the functional value of the images, that is, their communicative power, has been rightly underlined (Winter 2000a). Frankfort's study was the first attempt to classify seals by stylistic development over time: variation in style and representational schemes was theorized and became the point of reference for subsequent classifications.

Zainab Bahrani (2003: 13–49) has emphasized approaching the “art of the seals” in a systematic relationship with writing, with reference not only to their functional aspect but also—and more interestingly—to the “structural” one, according to principles of parallel and intrinsically linked relationships that can be traced over millennia. The way of doing things, then, conditions both art and writing, whether we consider it to be the result of a conscious intent to convey messages or one of the unconscious properties of style. During the Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2200 BCE), design and writing share a particularly elegant style, distinctive and recognizable in the treatment of figures, their reciprocal relationships and proportions, and their arrangement in space (Nissen 1988: 177). They substantially share those elements extending from the general conception of the representation, appreciable when viewing the entire figured surface, to the treatment of minute details (Michalowski 1990: 58). As with the development of Neo-Assyrian reliefs, with Akkadian seals it is possible to recognize significant changes that are useful for making chronological and stylistic attributions (Figure 5.3). For example, there is a clear change in the general concept of space. The design is nearly filled with figures in specimens dating to the transition from Early Dynastic III to the early Akkadian period (Boehmer 1965), but alternates between filled and empty spaces in the more mature Akkadian work (Nadali and Verderame 2005). The small dimensions of figures carved on seals obviously make it difficult to identify hands. Thus, the overall treatment of the carved design forms the basis for classification.



Figure 5.3 Cylinder seal and modern impression: contest scene, inscribed for Lugallam the scribe. Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2220 BCE). Limestone; 30 × 19 mm. Oriental Institute Museum OIM A3710.

Since few examples of large-scale sculptures and reliefs survive from the Akkadian period, it is difficult to reconstruct connections between seals and major arts. Whereas some kind of relationship is surely to be expected, some scholars stress the autonomy of the seal's iconographic repertoire from monumental sculpture in this period (Nadali and Verderame 2005). The situation seems to have differed from what happened in the Neo-Assyrian period, when many subjects in the glyptic repertoire were apparently borrowed from the palace reliefs (Winter 2000b).

Neo-Assyrian Reliefs

Unquestionably, Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs comprise a further class of material that has stimulated an approach based on detailed analysis of stylistic and iconographic elements useful for classification and attribution. R. M. Czichon (1992) summarized their general principles and representational criteria. The practice of decorating palace walls with figured orthostats lies ultimately in conceiving figural representation as a mean of narrating specific episodes in the military and religious lives of the Neo-Assyrian kings. The reliefs furnish an unrivaled wealth of information relating to several aspects of Neo-Assyrian visual production. They can, in fact, be studied from a broad range of perspectives, embracing technical, stylistic, iconographic, historical, conceptual, and symbolic features. They provide the opportunity to follow a specific artistic production over time, by verifying changes in the rendering of figures and application of precise formal rules. Systematic study of the Assyrian reliefs began early, almost at the time of their discovery in the mid-nineteenth century, and has generated a considerable literature.³

From the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, a general development in the scenes' structure is recognizable. It moves from a linear and parallel aggregation of the figures, divided horizontally by a band of inscription, to a more complex use of the carved surface, in which technical solutions are often invented to serve the representation's conceptual function. The location of the figures in space, the reciprocal relationships of component features, and the proportions of the figures and their relationship to space constitute the final goal of a process of elaborating an art intended to convey messages about specific aims and ideology (Winter 1981b, 1983; Russell 1999; Bahrani 2003; Fales 2009).

In this respect, a study aimed at classification and chronological attribution can be (and has been) made following the principles cited earlier in the words of Bianchi Bandinelli. That is to say, the notion of the space to be carved changes progressively according to a natural development (*svolgimento*),

prompting sculptors to find more adequate means to fulfill the communicative (or narrative) requirements of those who commissioned the works.

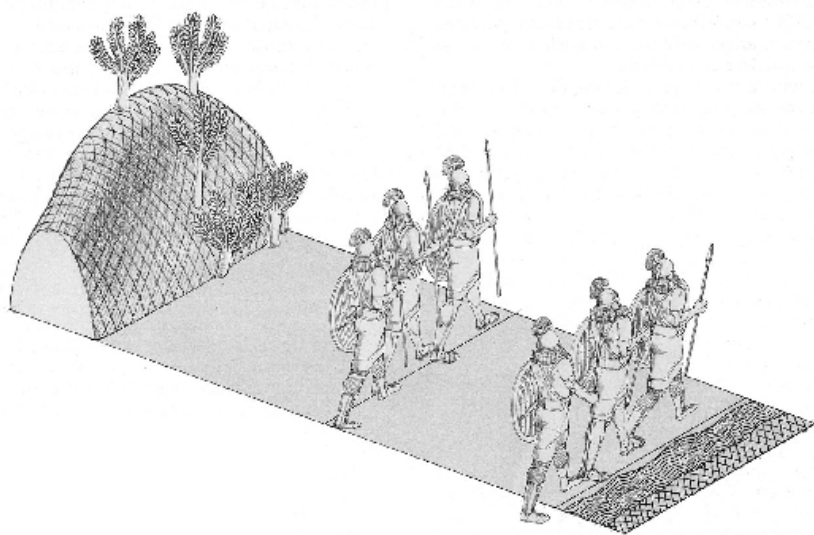
Meanwhile, the technical achievements underlying the development of this particular art form result from continual experimentation, which seems intent on replacing writing with figural narrative. Thus the reliefs can certainly be classified on the basis of macroscopic characteristics, primarily the relative proportions of the figures and their general location in space. This approach was the chief avenue of research pursued by scholars such as Henri Frankfort, Anton Moortgat, Julian Reade, and Irene Winter, who analyzed the alternating use of open and filled spaces, the placement of figures in the scenes, and their relationship to the edges of the stone slabs. These features are absolutely exempla of classification: once a conceptual grid is built, whereby the progressive development and sequence of the features are clearly established, then individual reliefs or relief fragments can be attributed to specific periods or reigns.

Moreover, the iconographic richness of the scenes allows the collecting of an enormous quantity of information on an iconographical level. Studies can address changes in dress, hairstyle, weapons, warfare tactics, architecture, and chariots, while at the same time information can also be gathered on landscape and environmental features. In all cases, however, the “art” of the reliefs was studied at a general level. And the “function” of their style, in a more or less unconscious way, always lay at the heart of these investigations. This happened because the Assyrians conceived of the figured reliefs as functional expedients. At a certain point, not only the relief itself had a more or less *concrete* function—narration—but also the style, or the way of rendering the scenes, was made to serve specific communicative aims. Style, then, sometimes becomes iconography. A way of doing things can be altered by an unconscious expression of identity or by the wish to experiment with the best means to achieve specific communicative purposes.

Detailed stylistic connoisseurship of the Neo-Assyrian reliefs has seldom been undertaken. Analyses by Ekrem Akurgal (1949, 1966) analyzed minute visual details with the aim of attributing small fragments to the reign of a particular king. Adopting a near-Morellian approach unusual in studies of ancient Near Eastern art, Akurgal observed intriguing details about the design of the knees of human figures, including genii and kings. He concluded that a particular treatment of the knee characterized the older, ninth-century reliefs of Assurnasirpal II: here the kneecap was rendered by three rolls of equal thickness. Later, from the reign of Sargon II onward, the kneecap was rendered as a central, almond-shaped element enclosed by the upper and lower rolls meeting in an arch (Akurgal 1966: 40–42, figs. 7a–b; Pappalardo 2001). This kind of analysis can be considered an example of micro-scale connoisseurship in the Morellian model. In such studies, connoisseurship and classification are almost always aimed at chronological classification—unlike

investigations addressing artistic cultures whose written records allow close association linking the notion of “author” conceived as a personality with a *name*.

A volume devoted to Sennacherib’s reliefs at Nineveh (Benetti and Lippolis 2011) included an analytical study that sought to establish and detect recurrent and absent features, following an approach the same research group developed for the first-millennium ivories discussed earlier (Pappalardo 2006). The authors have made an interesting and innovative study of the formal principles guiding both the general conception of the scenes depicted in the reliefs and the smaller details that characterize a specific way of rendering features (Figure 5.4). In general, staggering and superimposition were the chief methods used to represent perspective with figures in the same register (Czichon 1992), theorized in the case of Sennacherib’s reliefs by means of a critical approach not unlike Erwin Panofsky’s (1961) traditional theory. This new study succeeded in *materially* deconstructing and reconstructing the processes underlining the visual-spatial configurations of Sennacherib’s throne room reliefs in order to identify persistent formulas: symmetry, staggering, superimposition, density, rotation-deformation, and movement (Benetti and Lippolis 2011: 109).



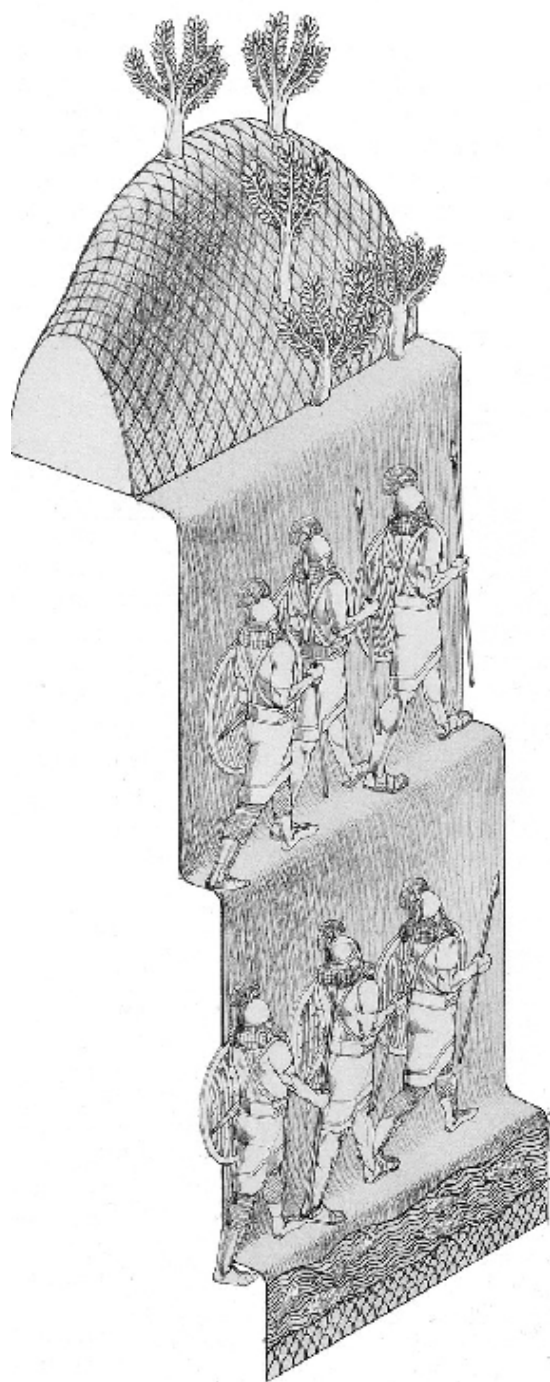




Figure 5.4 Schemes of representation in Sennacherib's reliefs.

Adapted from M. Benetti and C. Lippolis, "Osservazioni sui codici di rappresentazione visiva nei rilievi di Sennacherib," in *The Sennacherib Wall Reliefs at Nineveh*, ed. C. Lippolis (Florence: Le lettere, 2011), figs. 5.2b, 5.24. Reproduced with permission.

Conclusion

This chapter has briefly described how the art of the ancient Near East has been, and could further be, the focus of processes of connoisseurship and

classification. The difficulty in executing this kind of analysis lies in the heterogeneity of artistic production in this area and its broad geographical extent. Nevertheless, the discussion of three important categories—ivories, seals, and reliefs—has emphasized the need for a shared terminology and common method, in order to elaborate a framework useful to scholars who want to approach a specific aspect of artistic production extending over more than three thousand years. Irene Winter's (2005) proposed model for classifying first-millennium carved ivories, partly inspired by Western approaches, provides a solid starting point that can be developed and applied to multiple art forms, particularly those characterized by long-term production where changes in style can be clearly recognized. It must be stressed, in fact, that stylistic patterns can vary at several levels: individual, household, community, and region. This *pyramidal* variation, moreover, can result from an articulated range of variables (Flannery 1967; Plog 1978, 1983).

In the meantime, important categories must be considered fundamental tools for comprehending changes or adaptations of artistic production. In addition to such fundamental elements as style, subject matter, tools and workmanship, and materials, all information useful for reconstructing the context of production needs to be collected and considered. This comprehensive approach is crucial to defining the social practices that conditioned the production, collecting, display, recording, and preservation of works of art, the human behavior underlying the ways documentary evidence enters the public domain.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

An art historian (Winter 2005) and a philosopher (Brown 2008) offer insightful theoretical reflections on classification and connoisseurship. DiPaolo 2014 examines scholarship on the notion of “workshop” in ancient Near Eastern art, with useful references. For recent studies of comparable issues in ancient Greek and Roman art, see Borbein 2014 and Steiner 2014.

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NOTES

- 1 Pioneering investigations include Conkey [1978](#); Gamble [1982](#); Jochim [1983](#); Wiessner [1983](#); Wobst [1977](#).
- 2 Key contributions include Winter [1976](#), [1981a](#), [2005](#); Herrmann [1989](#), [2000](#), [2005](#); Barag [1983](#); Wicke [2005](#); Pappalardo [2006](#), [2009](#); all with further references.
- 3 Fundamental studies include Groenewegen-Frankfort [1951](#); Frankfort (1954) [1996](#); Parrot [1961](#); Moortgat [1969](#); Reade [1979](#); Winter [1981b](#), [1983](#); and Russell [1991](#).

CHAPTER SIX

Visual Culture

Sarah B. Graff

Introduction

The ever-expanding academic area known as visual culture, visual studies, or visual culture studies provides a promising perspective from which to approach the study of ancient Near Eastern art.¹ Visual culture studies is a relatively new interdisciplinary approach incorporating a large set of loosely associated critical approaches to the visual experience of the world. One broad definition holds that visual culture studies aims to investigate the culturally specific ways in which visual images are both bearers of meaning and themselves participate in making meaning. It is especially concerned with comparing culturally specific visual expressions—meaning the full range of images, including everything from concrete physical objects to those that exist only in the imagination. In W. J. T. Mitchell's influential view, visual culture studies aims neither to fetishize images nor to destroy them, but rather to explore their various resonances in a spirit of curiosity, resisting the urge to assign meaning to a single, fixed position: what he calls (echoing Nietzsche) “sounding the idols” (Mitchell 2005: 5–27). Scholars working from this angle take as their object of study the entire range of visual expression, while also acknowledging that all media are mixed media and there is no way to study pure visuality on its own (Mirzoeff 2009: 3–4).

Beyond this point, approaches begin to diverge. Some insist on the primacy of the phenomenological encounter between observer and image, privileging it over the transmission of meaning from one to the other (Belting 1994, 2005; Boehm 1994). Others analyze the image as a sign within a rich semiotic field and/or a specific social or cultural context, motivated by a search for meaning(s) rather than an investigation of the subjective encounter with the image (Bryson and Bal 1991; Bryson, Holly, and Moxey 1994). If there is a single common thread, it is perhaps that visual culture studies takes a historiographic approach to the discipline of art history—with all the variability that such an approach implies.

In some ways, the idea of a summary introduction to visual culture studies is anathema to the approach itself, which consciously resists the positivist tradition in which accumulated knowledge solidifies into accepted truth, through processes that seem to be natural but actually create and enact repressive structures of dominance (as in the model of the ideological state

apparatus formulated by Althusser 1971). Thus, it would not suffice to summarize all the important contributions to the field, or to provide a critical perspective on how these contributions fed into or ran up against others comprising the stream of the discipline. Indeed, disagreements and diverging visions are productive constituents of the discourse, as evident from the varied responses to the “Visual Culture Questionnaire” posed in 1996 to a number of leading scholars in the journal *October*, and furthermore in the reactions to those responses (Rogoff 1998; Mitchell 2005: 96–97).

In short, visual culture studies cannot be clearly and simply defined; or, while there is no lack of definitions and statements of what visual culture studies is and does, there is no single definition on which everyone can agree, but instead a lively and ongoing debate. Perhaps this situation is to be expected, as a key task of visual culture studies is precisely to question and disrupt the networks through which meaning is constructed. The process has been compared with Jacques Derrida’s semiotic concept of *différance* (Rogoff 1998: 15; Moxey 2008: 141). *Différance*, a word Derrida deliberately misspells in a homophonic way to point out the limits of phonetic communication, plays on the two senses of the word *différer*, “to defer” and “to differ.” It conceives of the relationship between the sign and what it signifies as a link constructed through constant deferral of meaning, and through constant enunciation of difference. In Derrida’s (1982) view, signs are infinitely polysemic; signification occurs only by differentiation of a sign from what it is not. Visual culture studies likewise seeks to expose the ways in which images, like words, possess dynamic rather than fixed relationships to meaning or interpretation.²

Another way to think of the perspective provided by visual culture studies would be to draw on Jacques Lacan’s (1978) concept of the gaze, which identifies what the viewer sees as a highly mediated field of vision rather than a transparent picture of reality.³ Lacan is primarily interested in how to understand perception itself, and his approach thus foregrounds the process of interpretation and insists on the impossibility of a complete, authoritative perspective. If the gaze sees what it wants to see, each viewer will necessarily see something different; comparing multiple perspectives not only draws out aspects hidden from any one viewpoint, but also sheds light on the particular desires the viewer projects onto the object of the gaze. The approach focuses on the encounter with the image or object, and the process of interpretation is revealed as something unfamiliar and strange by removing the guise of objectivity. Similarly, visual culture studies seeks to reveal the strangeness and complexity of images through close examination, and to examine further the ways in which the process of examination is itself mediated and particular.

In general, visual culture studies is primarily concerned with analyzing media belonging to the postmodern era, abandoning the distinction between high art and mass culture: not only painting and sculpture but also photography, film

and television, and also the internet and other new media (Dikovitskaya 2012: 73–74; Herbert 2003: 453; Mitchell 2005: 347–48). This contemporary orientation has led to criticism of visual culture studies as ahistorical (Smith 2008: ix, 9–11). Yet a strong current in visual culture studies has always stemmed from investigation of earlier periods (Nelson 2000), including Byzantine (Belting 1994) or early modern European (Freedberg 1989) devotional images, and even ancient Roman sculpture (Zanker 1990; Hölscher 2004) and wall painting (Bryson 1990). The investigations cited here may or may not have been undertaken with knowledge of developments in visual culture studies;⁴ some of them have been adopted as foundational texts, while others have largely escaped the notice of visual culture scholars. Nonetheless, they all share a generous scope that encompasses visual media of many different types produced for various audiences, and a fundamental concern not only with what these images meant but how they participated in the construction of meaning and culture for certain individuals and groups at specific periods in history—an orientation that is both well suited to the study of the ancient Near East and familiar from methodological paradigms already in use in the field.

Because it focuses on troubling the waters rather than providing a neat and well-defined framework, visual culture studies may be more productively understood as a critical orientation or a way to approach existing disciplines, such as art history, rather than as a stand-alone field.⁵ It seems to me an area of investigation that can be imagined not as a single flow of information, but as multiple heterogeneous offshoots making up a profusion of ideas and insights. This nonlinear model is especially appealing on a conceptual level, given the place of ancient Near Eastern art within the teleological view of art history. As taught in introductory art history courses, ancient Near Eastern art has often been conceived as an early and ultimately unsatisfactory evolutionary step that was discarded in favor of the realism of Greek and Roman art (Bahrani 2003: esp. 54–58; Evans 2012). A historiographic awareness of our own discipline should remind scholars of the ancient Near East that linear approaches have rarely served this material well.

Finally, the concept of branching rather than linear structures of knowledge also recalls Horst Bredekamp's (2005) discussion of Charles Darwin's sketches of coral, which Bredekamp argues were an essential aspect of Darwin's scientific analysis that enabled him to work through ideas about relations among species that could not be solely expressed in words (Moxey 2008: 138–39). Bredekamp (2005: 24) pays special attention to a page on which Darwin's words and sketches seem particularly interdependent: "‘I think’ schreibt der Denker—und spricht die Skizze." From this evocative picture of a conversation between and/or through words and images, I would like to borrow both the idea of words (those of ancient people and their modern interpreters) and images as inseparable parts of the cognitive process,

rather than split into a semiotic/phenomenological dyad (on which see further below). In this spirit, I follow several of the branches within visual culture studies that seem to me most interesting and relevant to ancient Near Eastern art. Along the way it is helpful to keep in mind certain overall questions as a guide:

- What does considering ancient Near Eastern art as visual culture entail and accomplish? How can this be achieved? What is revealed by refocusing attention on the visual and on the processes by which scholars categorize visual aspects of objects (e.g., formal and stylistic analysis, object typologies)?
- How can we understand the ways in which the cultures and societies of the ancient Near East conceived of visuality and the construction of visual images? Similarly, which images participated in the construction of ancient Near Eastern societies and cultures, and how?

By no means are these the only questions relevant to ancient Near Eastern material culture within visual culture studies, and they should serve only to demonstrate that the approach is both valuable and, indeed, already in use among scholars of the ancient Near East.⁶ Whether studies of ancient images are accepted within visual culture studies or the insights of these new approaches welcomed within the former, the two do in fact lend themselves to remarkable opportunities for cross-fertilization.

With its call to open up the entire field of material culture for analysis, visual culture studies seems naturally fitted to the inclusive nature of archaeological data. Indeed, it could provide useful insights into the way in which even the seemingly impartial process of recording empirical observations derived from excavation bears the traces of social construction—a subject already explored by Ian Hodder and members of recent expeditions at the site of Çatalhöyük, among others (Hodder 2000; see also Evans 2012). Additionally, visual culture studies could gain new perspectives from the ancient Near East. The ongoing debates within visual culture studies often coalesce into two strains: the “iconic turn,” in which the image itself, as a source of magic and power, takes precedence in both the viewer’s experience and in the analysis; and “visual culture,” in which the social and cultural functions of the image take precedence (Moxey 2008; Wolff 2012 offers a perspective that does not seek to reconcile the two). As Keith Moxey (2008: 142) has written, the first conceives of the image as a *presentation*, and focuses on the individual viewer’s experience and the transcendent power of the image, while the second sees the image as a *representation*, which bears meaning beyond itself.

These two perspectives reflect the grounding of visual culture studies in a US/European or generally Western worldview, in which the categories of mind, meaning, and interpretation are fundamentally separate from those of body, experience, and presence. As Irene J. Winter (1989) and Zainab Bahrani

(2001b, 2003) have convincingly demonstrated, in the ancient Near East these particular divisions simply did not exist. Perhaps the greatest potential contribution of the study of ancient Near Eastern images to the debate is to open up possibilities beyond these two modes. Such an approach presents possibilities similar to those Laura U. Marks (2010) explores in her recent work arguing for the influence of Islamic art and classical Arabic philosophy on new media art (Manovich 2003 defines the latter). This comparison seems at first to overreach its bounds. But Marks (2010: esp. 61–69) argues convincingly that all three share an emphasis on embodied perception, which refocuses the meaning of the encounter between image and viewer on the subjective and multisensory experience of the viewer, and presents a conceptual frame in which bodily and cognitive experiences are fused rather than split, as in Western dualistic thought. Her thesis provides a valuable stimulus toward rethinking some of the basic analytic framework of both Islamic and new media art. Similar investigations of ancient Near Eastern art hold considerable promise to generate revolutionary ideas and new perspectives that affect not only the understanding of this particular area, but the study of visual culture in general.

Hierarchies of Objects: Defining “Art”

A rare point of agreement among scholars of visual culture is that a vast range of images and artifacts is considered worthy of investigation. This inclusiveness is one of the ways in which visual culture studies distinguishes itself from art history. While art still falls within the purview of visual culture, it is no longer the only suitable category of images for examination; moreover, its status as “art” is not accepted as given but taken as a starting point for questions. On a practical level, this means that an unmanageably enormous field of material is opened up for scrutiny—a problem that has in turn spawned the creation of novel insights and analytical models. For instance, a field called Cultural Analytics was created both to analyze massive quantities of data using computational methods and to examine the “underlying assumptions and conceptual foundations” undergirding existing techniques for large-scale data analysis (Manovich 2007). Cultural Analytics has many affinities with visual culture studies, in its historiographic orientation and interest in examining the driving forces behind the seemingly unconscious processes through which knowledge accumulates. Since the vastly expanded field of study common to both Cultural Analytics and visual culture studies is remarkably reminiscent of the enormous amount of data produced through archaeological excavation, it is intriguing to consider the possibilities it presents for analyzing archaeological data, such as pottery

typologies or object catalogues.

Despite its stated inclusion of all visual imagery, however, visual culture studies tends to focus on contemporary media. James D. Herbert (2003: 453) argues that this is due more to the already staked territorial claims of art history to older forms of visual culture than to any particular limitation of the field itself, noting that “simple, everyday objects that have survived from distant times tend to assume, in our own day, the mantle of high art.” Questions can be raised about why certain objects attain this classification; the social, cultural and historical mechanisms behind the labeling process; and how these mechanisms function. Furthermore, an important corollary to expanding the category of images worth studying is that *responses* to images can also move away from a hierarchy of importance and validity, with the entire range of human behavior, including folklore, superstition, and iconoclasm, coming under fresh scrutiny, as exemplified in David Freedberg’s (1989) influential work. Some scholars of ancient Near Eastern art have similarly insisted on taking seriously practices such as magic performed through images, which involve discourses beyond the aesthetic realm of art history (Green 1983; Wiggermann 1992; Nakamura 2004; Nakamura, this volume).

Investigating the questions “what is art” and “how does something become art” provides especially rich results when applied to ancient and/or non-Western material culture, for which the answers to these questions have never been stable. Museum displays and academic studies in these areas often set up an inherent tension between the objects’ aesthetic qualities and their roles as contextualized bearers of meaning—in other words, between art and anthropology (Price 1989: 82–99; Bahrani 2003: 40–49; Dutton 2000; Conkey 2010). Visual culture studies seeks to reintegrate the two, although this process is not without some friction (Alpers et al. 1996).

Debates that engage with the history and problems of designating certain ancient Near Eastern images as “art” are becoming more prevalent (Winter 1995, 2009; Evans 2012; Bahrani 2014), joining parallel investigations devoted to Egypt and the classical world (Baines 1994; Assmann 2011; Osborne 2010; Tanner 2010). Both Irene J. Winter and Zainab Bahrani have contributed importantly to Mesopotamian aesthetics and systems of representation. Bahrani (2003) observes that because ancient Near Eastern art largely avoids mimetic realism—that is, direct reproduction of what the eye sees with a high degree of fidelity—it occupies an aesthetically deficient position within the scheme of Hegelian formalist analysis that was foundational to the discipline of art history. Rather than providing as a corrective a view that depends on reconstructing the original context of these images in order to understand them, she insists on the importance of interrogating the (re)contextualization itself, which is no less mediated than is aesthetic response (Bahrani 2003: 73–95). She frames the work of the art

historian of the ancient Near East as ethnography, in which the interpreter's role is foregrounded rather than naturalized. Her argument draws on Derrida's *différance* as a parallel and metaphor, not an analytical model, for the Mesopotamian system of representation, as both depend on constructing meaning through chains of signifiers rather than through a one-to-one relationship between sign and signified.

Disembodied Images: Reconstructions and Simulacra

Disembodied images—images that exist fundamentally in encoded digital form and have no physical, tangible reality—are a special interest of visual culture studies. Herbert (2003: 456) lists categories of such disembodied or virtual media in order of increasing immateriality: photography, film, television and video, digitalized images stored on a computer, and finally digitalized images that exist only within networks such as the World Wide Web. The last two categories, known together as “new media,” or “computer-based artistic activities” (Manovich 2003: 13), have especially stimulated new scholarship (see Giddings and Lister 2011). A parallel development has been the increased focus on the critical use of the construct of a “matrix” as a metaphor for the relationship between humans and technology, which is paradoxically both a man-made innovation and a force that constrains human agency. Such a matrix provides a way to theorize relations between the immaterial and the material:

As McLuhan and Baudrillard point out ... technology is often assumed to involve a process of abstraction, an escape from the matter/matrix within which the human has been fashioned and reproduced. But the effects of this immaterial form are frequently felt within society at a material level ... The paradox of this *im/materiality* (a term we adopt to express this double articulation) manifests itself in numerous ways. For instance, we might note that much of contemporary capitalism is simultaneously abstract in appearance yet powerful in its material effects for those on the receiving end.

(Harris and Taylor 2005: x, emphasis in the original)

In a similar vein, Jean Baudrillard asserted that technology and the culture of postmodernity have produced a fundamental break in the fabric of reality so that there is no longer any difference between the real and the simulated. Instead, there is only the hyperreal, “hyper-” because it no longer exists in relation to simulation and thus doubles back on itself: “it [the real] is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore” (Baudrillard 1994: 2). Instead of copies that have a direct relationship

(positive or negative) to the real thing they mimic, representations move into the realm of simulacra, or copies that have no original. In a world increasingly dominated by technologies that create convincing images of the impossible, or something that never existed, such ideas have urgent resonance. The concept of the im/material technological matrix has great potential as a model for studying the relations between conceptual and concrete realms in the ancient Near East, but perhaps more immediately evident is its relevance to current scholarship.

In particular, archaeology, which has been quick to adopt technologies ranging from three-dimensional rendering to remote sensing through ground-penetrating radar, can be vulnerable to an uncritical acceptance of simulacra. Nineteenth-century reconstructions, such as Austen Henry Layard's watercolor of the throne room of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) ([Figure 6.1](#)), include elements that are now clearly recognizable as reflections of their time, revealing the constitutive ideology underlying Victorian notions of Assyria ([Bahrani 2001a](#); [Seymour 2014](#): ch. 5). Together with other early reconstructions it can therefore be usefully studied for what they reflect about the formational practices of Near Eastern archaeology. While no archaeologist today would trust Layard's reconstruction to provide an unmediated, accurate image of the ninth-century throne room, we approach virtual reconstructions of ancient architecture and cityscapes with much less caution.⁷ The same space, Room B of the Northwest Palace, has been reconstructed in virtual space, creating a fully rendered environment peopled by Assyrian officials whose appearance is based on representations in Neo-Assyrian art, and containing reconstructed furniture based on ivory fragments excavated at Nimrud ([Figure 6.2](#)). The creators of this virtual throne room have drawn on their professional training as archaeologists in a painstaking attempt to come as close as possible to bringing the ancient space back to life, and the viewing experience has undoubtedly become far more immersive. Without in any way diminishing the efforts of either, however, I want to draw attention to the fact that the new, virtual reality throne room is just as much a simulacrum as Layard's watercolor. If we are dazzled and reassured by the skilled use of technology and fail to remember that what we see is not objective reality but a mediated version of it, we run the risk of creating our own self-fulfilling prophecies, as [Bahrani \(2001a\)](#) has demonstrated for the earliest reconstructions of Assyrian palaces. Moreover, the serious investment in reconstructions at the expense of the sites themselves has very real and tragic consequences ([Micale 2012](#))—an example of the devastating effects of the immaterial on the material. Or, to put it another way, “our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view” ([Baudrillard 1994](#): 10). Reconstructions, and archaeology in general ([Meskell 1998](#)), are not simply disinterested efforts to preserve ancient Near Eastern culture, but also act as vitally important elements constituting the knowledge and power of contemporary Western culture.



Figure 6.1 Reconstruction of throne room, Northwest Palace, Nimrud.

From Austen Henry Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh from Drawings Made on the Spot* (London: J. Murray, 1849), pl. 2.



Figure 6.2 Rendering from the Learning Sites virtual reality reconstruction of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II, Nimrud, showing a view down the throne room from near the king's position.

Image © Learning Sites, Inc.

In Baudrillard's (1994) formulation, it is the simulacra that precede reality and dictate the ways in which reality will appear. Reconstructions, databases, remote sensing data and other images or tools that have the backing of advanced technology conceal the uncertainty that exists in reality, when in fact there is no original truth that can ever be resurrected.⁸

Nor is art history immune to the lure of the simulacrum. To return to Assurnasirpal's throne room, art historians have persistently been interested in identifying the peoples depicted fighting Assyrian troops in the series of palace combat scenes. Both Julian Reade (1985) and Irene J. Winter (1981, 1983) have made convincing arguments for many of the scenes, although their views diverge in many particulars. Both assume from the outset, however, that the tantalizingly specific details shown in the reliefs—details of dress and coiffure—reflect in an ethnographic way the actual appearance of these groups that are named in the royal annals and shown in seemingly straightforward style on the palace reliefs. While both authors may very well be correct, more questions should also be asked.⁹ Could it be that the creators of the reliefs never intended a direct match between the people shown in the reliefs and those described in the annals? Were the scenes on the reliefs in fact intended to record actual events? The Standard Inscription that runs across the middle of every relief in the Northwest Palace is almost identical on each panel. What are we to make of this combination of general text and seemingly specific, highly descriptive depiction? As depicted in the relief of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, the Battle of Qadesh (ca. 1275 BCE) was an Egyptian victory; the treaty between the Hittites and Egyptians indicates that it was a draw, with both sides equally matched. If only Egyptian depictions of the battle had survived, would history record it as a Hittite defeat? In short, why do we believe what certain images—ancient and modern—tell us until proven otherwise?

The Image in/on the Stone

When one closely considers what exactly constitutes a disembodied image, it becomes evident that, as Mitchell (2005: 97) observes, “the image has always been immaterial in one way or another.” For instance, Hittite rock-carved reliefs have frequently been studied in cropped photographs and drawings that isolate the figurative aspects of the image on the page, creating floating images that can be easily comprehended through printed representations. Transforming the reliefs into purely formal, abstract entities severs their connection to the living rock from which they are carved and, indeed, to the landscape in which they are situated (see Figure 20.2 in Harmanşah, this volume). Ömür Harmanşah (2011; Harmanşah, this volume), in particular, has pointed out this rupture and endeavored to situate the carved reliefs in space,

relating them to the springs and other natural features they adjoined; and in time, drawing connections between relief monuments carved by different peoples over millennia in the same locations, such as the Tigris Tunnel. In addition, by drawing attention to what disappears when the rock reliefs are studied as disembodied images, Harmanşah has foregrounded the materiality of the rock itself. Not only did the reliefs mark ritually significant places in the earth where the divine world or netherworld could be accessed, but the act of carving the rock could be seen as revealing the deity whose essence was immanent in the eternal, ageless living rock. This interpretation brings to mind both the im/material matrix (Harris and Taylor 2005) and the unfolded surface of enfolded information (Marks 2010, 2011).

Investigating the materiality of images also sheds light on the peculiar aspects of seals, especially cylinder seals. As the object type perhaps most closely associated with ancient Near Eastern art, cylinder seals have been studied from many angles: their style, iconography, inscriptions, and archaeological provenance have all been rich sources for information-gathering and analysis. If one considers the materiality of cylinder seals, however, a far less familiar picture emerges. Cylinder seals are usually displayed and studied through modern impressions; indeed, in many publications the actual seal stones themselves are omitted. The choice of how to roll out a cylinder seal in a modern impression is highly codified: the entire surface of the seal is always impressed, and usually some attempt is made to “frame” the image at left and right by cutting off the impression at the edge of nondirectional elements such as trees, or at the back of a figure facing into the field of the impression, rather than outwards towards the edge. Yet the pictorial field of a seal is bounded only at top and bottom, and properly speaking has no end or beginning (Bahrani 2014: 129–30). Although not explicitly acknowledged, observation makes clear that certain rules govern the process of rolling out modern seal impressions; that is, by viewing catalogues or studies where many modern impressions appear grouped together, their shared visual syntax becomes apparent. Ancient seal impressions, by contrast, demonstrate quite different choices in how the imagery appears, and furthermore vary from period to period in their expression (Rakic 2003, 2013).

Returning to the seals themselves, the situation becomes even more complex when we investigate the physical reality of the image—in effect, when we attempt to reunite disembodied image with stone, as in the previous example of the Hittite rock reliefs. There is no single perspective from which one can view all the images carved on the curved surface of a cylinder seal; it must be rotated in the hand to give a view of one small vertical section at a time. Additionally, some of the stones used for cylinder seals have their own striking appearance, which can render the carved image illegible, especially in the case of sharply contrasting banded stones (Figure 6.3). Seals in this material vividly demonstrate the concept of anamorphosis, discussed by

Jacques Lacan (1978) in connection with the gaze: either the carved image on the seal is visible or the decorative patterns of the stone take visual precedence, but the two cannot be viewed simultaneously. Whichever is not in focus remains as the trace or stain, in Lacan's terminology, left by the other image—evidence of one gaze imposing on the other. The perception of the object thus shifts between pure materiality and pure image. Not every seal is made of spectacular material, certainly, but even those stones or other media that provide a solid-colored visual field often have their own sensory interest independent of the carved images. As Erica Reiner (1995) has demonstrated, in Babylonia certain stones were thought to possess apotropaic or magical qualities. Perhaps the foregrounding of the material was intentional or efficacious in some instances for specific stones.



Figure 6.3 Cylinder seal and modern impression: contest scene; inscribed for owner, Shakallum. Akkadian period, ca. 2350–2200 BCE. Chalcedony; 3.6 × dia. 2.3 cm. British Museum ME 89147.

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Cylinder seals present yet another complication in their imagery. Even if one were able to view the entire pictorial field of the cylinder seal at once, every seal (with rare exceptions) is carved in reverse, thus privileging the impression as the “real” image. But in this case, the real image is not the original, only the impression of the carved stone; it is endlessly duplicable; and it is subject to the dictates or desires of the person rolling it. The carved decoration itself remains a truly virtual image: it is an image permanently coming into being, which performs the act of creation with every rolling, but remains conceptually untethered from any definitive material expression. Cylinder seals seem to exemplify the interface Laura U. Marks (2010: 5–11, fig. 1.4) describes between information and images. In her view, the image (i.e., that which can be perceived) unfolds from (a matrix of) information enfolded in the infinite; thus, “the image is merely the selectively unfolded surface of enfolded information” (Marks 2011: 249), an apt description of the relation between impression and cylinder seal.

Images as Constructions of/by Culture

One of the most influential branches of visual culture studies derives from using methodologies borrowed from other fields, combined with close visual investigations of images that are located within a specific context: a hybrid of art history with other disciplines such as semiotics, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory (Bryson and Bal 1991; Bryson, Holly, and Moxey 1994; Nelson 2000). Margaret Dikovitskaya (2012: 72) has summed up this approach as one that aims “to address the complex ways in which meanings are produced and circulated in specific social contexts.” It is perhaps easy to forget how revolutionary these types of investigations still seem to many art historians in other fields of specialization, where connoisseurship, attribution, and authentication remain the discipline’s foundations (Mitchell 2005). In this respect, the ancient Near East holds great potential for flexibility, as it lacks a comparably established tradition of aesthetics to defend. On the contrary: while formal analysis has long been an important part of art historical methodology, ancient Near Eastern aesthetics has only recently begun to receive serious and sustained attention, as noted earlier. By contrast, analysis incorporating anthropological, historical, and ethnographic paradigms is more firmly rooted within the study of the ancient Near East, which has been an interdisciplinary pursuit almost from the start. Visual culture studies brings to this already thriving area a perspective that foregrounds processes of visual communication and perception, and insists on the importance of the viewer’s encounter (both now, and in the past) with the object. I discuss here several studies from the ancient Near East that demonstrate what can be done by pushing an already interdisciplinary approach to consider “big questions” of the sort visual culture studies insists on raising.

Space at Babylon

Ancient Near Eastern material culture exists in strange tension with the evidence from cuneiform texts. The two have only recently begun to be considered together, even though inscribed figurative objects are numerous, and when they are, a tug-of-war can ensue over which is the more reliable authority, especially in the case of contradictions. Art historians such as Irene J. Winter and Zainab Bahrani have succeeded in joining both types of analysis together and demonstrating that even apparent incongruities were often a deliberate means of producing desired effects. It is perhaps less widely recognized that Assyriologists have also made important contributions to

understanding and conceptualizing the visual environment of the ancient Near East. Rather than seeing the texts as a database to be dipped into to confirm object-based arguments, we can instead appreciate the insights they offer into the perceptual experiences of the people whose histories they record.

Marc Van De Mieroop's (2003) semiotic reading of the city of Babylon in the sixth century BCE, which combines the limited archaeological evidence with the textual record, demonstrates the types of rich insights that can result from such an approach. In discussing the topological texts that list certain features of the city, such as temples and city-gates, Van De Mieroop (2003: 258) notes that these lists record what the Babylonians considered as the constitutive elements of "the image of the city." It is the *image* of Babylon that can be accessed, a reflection of what first- or second-hand observers considered to be the features of the city that provided definition and particularity. His tour of the ancient city takes into account how the verticality and great mass of the walls would have formed a dramatic visual contrast with the flat landscape in which it was situated, which, in conjunction with the vast moats that surrounded them, reenacted the "primordial mound" of Babylonian creation myth, rising out of the marshes (Van De Mieroop 2003: 262–63; Maul 1997). The vivid evocation of space and ancient perceptions of the city seamlessly fuse material and textual evidence.

Stefan Maul (1997) is similarly concerned with how the city's ancient inhabitants understood Babylon's unique cosmological and theological status. By starting his discussion with a careful reading of Sumerian and Akkadian words for "past" and "future," he contributes significantly to our understanding of how ancient Mesopotamians conceived of the relationship between spatiality and temporality. Through an etymological analysis, he shows that these words derive respectively from the words for "front" and "back"; thus, Mesopotamian speakers of these languages "proceeded, so to speak, 'with their backs forward,' that is, facing backwards into the future. Without wanting to overburden this image, one could say that the attention of Mesopotamian culture was directed towards the past and thus ultimately towards the origins of all existence" (Maul 1997: 109). The ramifications of this insight for understanding Mesopotamian spatial and temporal concepts are potentially extremely rich. At a minimum, Maul's attention to what would seem a minor linguistic point should serve to remind scholars of the invisible yet pervasive ways in which our own language structures our processes of critical thinking. It is difficult or impossible to imagine a concept if one's language lacks the words for it.

Visuality

The two studies just cited offer stimulating evidence for the unique and culturally specific ways in which perception was constructed in ancient Babylonia. Irene J. Winter (2000) has elaborated the linguistic and iconographic features of looking and viewer response in ancient Mesopotamia, persuasively arguing for nuanced types of gazes that each fulfilled a different function and produced a different effect. Her distinction between the response to visual wonders expressed by gods and kings, on the one hand, and common people, on the other, traces vision “not as an absolute but as a social phenomenon” (2000: 35). Winter concludes that the encounter between gods or kings and splendid sights, such as statues, temples or palaces, is characterized by the delight and acknowledgment proper to recognizing an equally powerful entity, while the common people respond with awestruck wonder to a sight by which they are overpowered.

The Materiality of Gold

A relatively new area of art history that has been deeply informed by visual culture studies foregrounds the materiality of the objects under study, both their methods of manufacture and the physical fact of the material itself. In particular, Kim Benzel (2013a, 2013b) has produced fresh insights through an investigation of goldwork from the perspective of jewelry-making techniques. Her assessment of triangular Canaanite gold plaques bearing images of nude frontal females (Figure 6.4) demonstrates the potential of such an approach, even when applied to material that has been exhaustively studied. The Canaanite plaques have generally been interpreted as representations of goddesses, and considerable effort has been devoted to identifying deities on particular plaques (U. Winter 1983). But Benzel (2013a: 260–61) observes that the manufacture of many of these plaques is not especially refined, as would be expected for objects produced in the service of an official cult. For this reason, she suggests that they served as personal emblems, embodying sexual allure in their erotically charged images and in the very shape of the plaques themselves, which echo the female pubic triangle that was an intense focus of sexualized attention in ancient Near Eastern art and literature. Even the precious material of the plaques can be argued to underscore erotic appeal as an adornment for the body of the beautiful, desirable female, as attested in the Sumerian debate of “Tree and Reed” and indeed in the female images on the plaques, which are themselves often depicted wearing jewelry (Benzel 2013a: 265–66). Gold had many different meanings in the ancient Near Eastern world, however, and other, or overlapping, possibilities that the use of this material conveyed include purity, life force, and divine radiance, or *melammu* (Winter 2012).



Figure 6.4 Pendant with nude goddess Hathor. Minet el-Beidha, deposit 213bis; ca. 1250 BCE. Gold; 4.7 × 2.3 cm. Musée du Louvre AO 14718.

Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Conclusion: Why (Not) Visual Culture Studies?

Within ancient Near Eastern archaeology and (to a lesser extent) art history there is discernible resistance to using strategies and theories derived from visual culture studies, and perhaps it is useful, in the historiographic spirit of this chapter, to explore briefly why this is so. This new area of critical investigation contrasts sharply with the field's nineteenth-century pedigree, canonized status within Euro-American elite cultural institutions (such as museums and universities), and long-standing alignment with empiricism (as evidenced by its reliance on data from excavation results and philological studies). All fields of study concerned with the ancient Near East also face the difficulty of accessing the distant past. Similar interventions in contemporary visual culture engender less resistance, simply because of the overwhelming profusion of data. If the only result of painstaking work is to open up more and more questions, some scholars of the ancient Near East may understandably opt instead for investigations that offer hope for solid conclusions. Perhaps this is easier said than done, however; this line of inquiry brings to mind A. Leo Oppenheim's (1964) famous insistence that it would be impossible to write a history of Mesopotamian religion—a declaration by a scholar whose many important contributions flouted his own proscription.

Additionally, the sheer volume of information available and the opaque self-referentiality of much current work can be daunting. Perhaps this is the major obstacle to embracing a visual culture studies approach: the obligation to learn a new scholarly language without the promise of adding to the body of knowledge understood to constitute the field. The study of the ancient Near Eastern past already requires interdisciplinary work at its foundations, on the most basic level integrating anthropology, archaeology, art history, philology, and history—a situation clearly reflected in the great variation among, for instance, the types of academic departments with a focus on the ancient Near East. Adding to this already encyclopedic range would seem at the outset more of a burden than an advantage. The non-dogmatic construction of visual culture studies helps the interested scholar manage this difficulty, however, as it does not require familiarity with the entire output of scholarship but allows selective engagement with provocative questions. While from the perspective of traditional art history, based on formal analysis, the flexibility of visual culture studies as a tool has famously been seen as a dangerous loss of rigor —“de-skilling” (Crow in Alpers et al. 1996; Herbert 2003: 462; Mitchell 2005: 336–56)—such concerns only make sense if the choice is presented as mutually exclusive, rather than as the addition of a new perspective from which to view art history.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Helpful starting points for those seeking an overview of visual culture studies (each with extensive bibliography) include Mirzoeff 2009 and Mirzoeff 1998/2013; Herbert 2003; the work of W. J. T. Mitchell (especially Mitchell 2005); Moxey 2008; Smith 2008; Dikovitskaya 2012; Jones 2010.

Prominent journals devoted to visual culture studies are *Critical Inquiry* (1974–) (each issue of which lists recent books of critical interest) and *Journal of Visual Studies* (2002–). Online resources are extensive and bound to change more quickly than a printed publication can reflect. A site that currently serves as a useful gateway and is likely to continue to grow is that of the Chicago School of Media Theory, with its keywords glossary <https://Lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/>. A valuable bibliography is also available at the website for the New York University/Steinhardt MA program in Visual Culture and Cultural Studies https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/scmsAdmin/uploads/004/047/VisualCulture%20_CulturalStudies_MA_Bibliography.pdf.

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NOTES

- 1 On finding a name for this new approach, see Smith (2008: 8–9). I here use “visual culture studies,” which seems to me the most inclusive term; the issues raised here call for casting a wide net.

- 2 Significantly, Bahrani 2003 also refers extensively to *différance* in the process of conceptualizing Mesopotamian systems of representation.
- 3 “The gaze” is almost a field in itself. See Mulvey 1975; Bryson 1988; hooks 1992.
- Jones (2010: 1–8) and Smith (2008: 4–8) survey the genesis and development of visual culture studies.
- 5 Mirzoeff (1998: 6–11) advocates a truly interdisciplinary stance, with an “adversarial” relationship to the academy.
- 6 Note the inclusion of Bahrani’s publications in the new edition of Mirzoeff 2013, and the topics discussed in recent meetings of the international branches of the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG).
- 7 As Layard was one of the few people who actually observed the traces of paint remaining on the reliefs, however, the information he recorded on color should perhaps be taken more seriously. Layard’s original drawings of the Assyrian reliefs and the *Monuments of Nineveh* volumes are extremely valuable, albeit subjective, sources on color—a point that has been lost in the rush to disavow early reconstructions as overly fanciful.
- 8 Green, Teeter, and Larson 2012 discuss the history of archaeological imaging techniques in the Near East and Egypt; Bilsel (2012: 159–88) describes the reconstruction of Babylon in the Pergamon Museum.
- 9 See, for instance, those raised by Brown 2014, whose argument draws important distinctions among the relief programs of the Assyrian kings depicting foreigners and discusses their changes over time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Technical Examination and Material Analysis

Deborah Schorsch

Introduction

This essay considers the technical examination of ancient works of art from the Near East, primarily in museum settings. The practice of studying physical aspects of these works with the aim of identifying methods of manufacture and materials, establishing authenticity, date, or cultural attribution, characterizing paths of deterioration, and developing methods of preservation, has a history reaching back well into the nineteenth century, when many of the world's largest museums were founded. Conservators and conservation scientists with varied and overlapping expertise, in cooperation with curators, art historians, archaeologists, and other specialists, now carry out this work in museums throughout the world.

Facilities available to museum researchers are rarely the same as those found in the field or in universities, and museum-based investigations may therefore differ in their aims and focus from those undertaken in these other settings. Works housed in museums have often been treated to stabilize their condition or improve their appearance, using methods that may compromise physical evidence of their manufacture or composition. Moreover, museum artifacts are often long divorced from their archaeological contexts, and “works of art” are typically perceived and displayed differently from other, perhaps more prosaic, classes of material culture. It is not possible to outline here all possible means applied to the technical study of materials and processes used by ancient artists. To be sure, technical investigators in art museums regularly consult and collaborate with specialists in natural history museums, universities, and industrial laboratories. Our emphasis here, however, is visual and instrumental analytical methods commonly used in museum laboratories, with special reference to works of art attributed to ancient cultures of the Near East. Replication of ancient technologies also plays a significant role in the technical study of works of art, but this subject lies outside this essay's scope (Grissom 2000; Politis et al. 2002).

It was Cyril Stanley Smith (1903–1992), an industrial metallurgist who came to focus on the manufacture of ancient and historic works of art, who initially recognized the important role of artists and artisans in the development of

early technologies. With his characterization of technology “as an eminently human experience,” he forged a new perspective that refines our understanding of their manufacture (Smith 1970: 493–94). “Technological style” is the sum of choices in terms of materials and processes that—like visual style—reflects specific cultural values and aspirations. Smith’s colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Heather Lechtman (1977) and Arthur Steinberg (1977), focusing respectively on New and Old World technologies, help bring his ideas to wider anthropological and archaeological circles. More recently, Ann Brysbaert considers the relationship between technology and power, and what past peoples “thought and felt and expressed through their material world” (2008: 1), based on the stylistic and technical analysis of Bronze Age wall paintings of the eastern Mediterranean.

Dating

As with most antiquities, a major concern in the study of ancient Near Eastern works of art is dating, and its cousin, authenticity. The latter issue is even more pressing when the work under consideration lacks a reliable provenience—a problem not limited to collections in Europe or North America. Even undisturbed archaeological contexts can be confusing, and objects derived from them are not always easy to date. There are only a few instrumental dating methods that are routinely applied to artifacts in art museums: radiocarbon dating for organic (formerly living) materials, and thermoluminescence dating for ceramics are the most common. The best technical tools for dating most ancient works are those that can be used to define a technological style—a specific cultural orientation and point of view—that can be recognized from the how, where, when, and why different raw materials and the manufacturing processes that transformed them were adopted and abandoned (Craddock 2009). Knowledge of ancient patterns of wear and renewal (Dooijes and Nieuwenhuyse 2009), mechanisms of decay, and early and contemporary conservation practices, is also essential for understanding manufacture and recognizing forgeries.

Analytical Tools

Technical studies of works of art generally start with visual examination, followed by instrumental methods of analysis that allow materials to be identified on the basis of molecular structure and/or elemental composition. Most methods are spectroscopic techniques that measure interactions between matter and specific wavelengths of light. Nearly all have the potential to be

used in invasive and non-invasive ways. Focusing as they do on different aspects of material or features of manufacture from different vantage points and magnifications, these various visual and analytical techniques are complementary. As the investigation proceeds, conservators always reexamine the work visually, evaluating and refining initial observations in view of data obtained through instrumental analysis.

Scientists use the term *destructive* to describe processes that destroy a sample during analysis. When it concerns cultural materials, however, any form of sampling is considered destructive, even if the sample survives. In this regard, works in art museums generally enjoy more respect than newly excavated materials or artifacts in archaeological collections. The size and condition of the work, the size of the sample, and the proposed sampling location, must be considered. It is most important to have a realistic expectation of the kind and quality of data a specific sample might provide and what questions the analysis may answer, and perhaps most critically, that no sample be removed before the work of art has been thoroughly examined. In addition, samples should be preserved so that in the future they may be reexamined by different investigators or using other analytical techniques.

Visual Analysis

Among the most valued tools in the technical study of works of art are the eyes of an experienced observer (e.g., Oddy 1996; Sax and Meeks 1995). Visual examination using conventional light sources is carried out under the range of magnifications provided by simple head loupes and optical and digital microscopes. On the upper end are the scanning electron microscopes, with the newest models extending theoretical magnification capabilities up to 1,000,000x. Also, specialized microscopes play a role in examining samples removed from works of art. For example, in order to investigate metal manufacture and corrosion structures—the latter especially relevant for authenticating copper and copper alloy artifacts (Schorsch 2014b)—samples that include intact surface and subsurface regions are embedded in a mounting medium, ground and polished to attain a specular surface, etched, and viewed with reflected light on an inverted stage microscope (Figure 7.1). Other materials, including wood and stone, are prepared as thin sections and viewed with transmitted light.

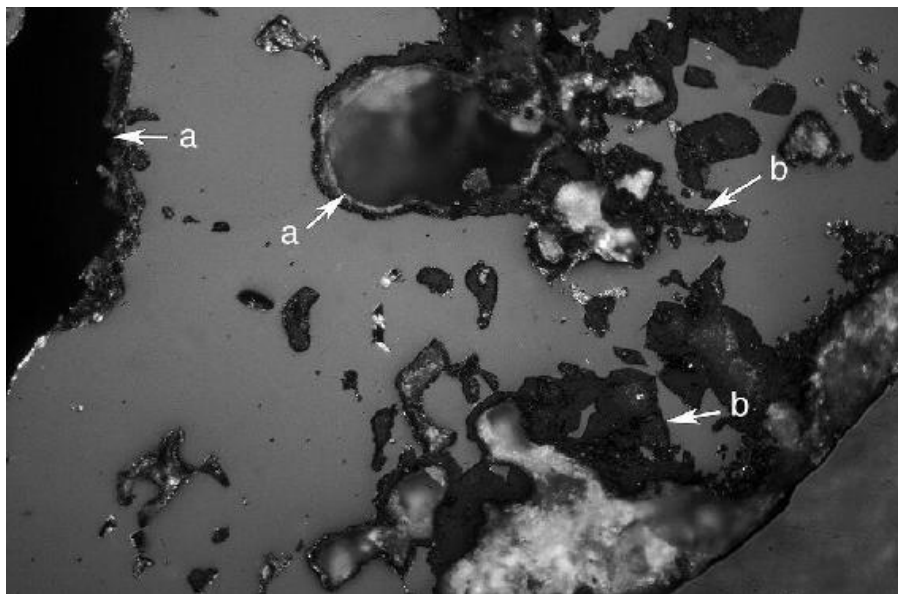


Figure 7.1 Polished metal section showing large pits residual from casting (a), and intergranular corrosion (b), which confirms this figure's authenticity. Male figure (Lebanese Mountain group). Provenience unknown; Lebanon, Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 BCE). Unalloyed copper; h. 35.7 cm. Geneva, Musée d'Art et d'Histoire 18724.

Image: D. Schorsch © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Initial assessments made with the unaided eye using light sources or capturing light emissions outside of the visible spectrum often are helpful, especially for assessing condition or studying pigments in situ. For example, ultraviolet light (UV) itself is invisible to the human eye, but light waves (luminescence and phosphorescence) emitted by certain materials when stimulated by UV light are within the visible spectrum, or can be recorded digitally or on film using special filters. Old interventions can be identified, because original surfaces tend to absorb UV radiation, while restoration materials used to reattach fragments, consolidate friable or delaminating materials, fill losses, and inpaint fills or overpaint damaged surfaces often fluoresce (Rorimer 1931). Currently, other applications for multispectral illumination are in development. Of particular interest for works of art from the ancient Near East is the use of visible induced luminescence (VIL) to identify the synthetic pigment Egyptian blue, which luminesces in the infrared (IR) region, and IR reflectance imaging (IRR) to evaluate the distribution of carbon black pigments (Verri et al. 2009).

Reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) is a new technique for examining and documenting surface detail on works of art. A sequence of digital photographs taken from a fixed point using illumination from a series of points at a fixed distance within a hemispherical grid is processed using

dedicated software to produce a composite image. RTI enables the subject to be viewed with the light source emanating from any chosen direction and the images to be mathematically manipulated. RTI has been designed so that it requires a minimum of equipment and is supported by open source software.¹

Radiography

X-rays are an invisible form of electromagnetic radiation strong enough to penetrate matter. At any given settings of kilovoltage, milliamperage, exposure time, and distance from target to film, the degree of penetration depends on the volume (thickness and density) of the object and the atomic weight of the materials from which it is made (Lang and Middleton 2005). Among the materials associated with the arts of the ancient Near East, radiographic methods can be applied most profitably to studies of metals, ceramics, plaster, wood, and textiles. Radiography is harmless to works of art, though some forethought may be advisable if there is a chance that a ceramic will later be subjected to thermoluminescence analysis because X-ray radiation may release luminescence, possibly skewing future measurements.

The X-ray radiation passes through an object to a greater or lesser degree and exposes a gelatin-based film or a digital plate proportionately to relative atomic weights and volume, to produce a black-and-white positive image that reveals its internal structure, thereby providing evidence of manufacture (Figure 7.2). Radiographs can signal that dissimilar materials were used together on a single artifact or for related artifacts, but also may reveal structural variations, which in the case of wood grain, for example, may reflect different species. Visually distinctive organic or inorganic inclusions in clays can point to different origins or processing. Very dense or thick materials can be penetrated using gamma radiography, with an unavoidable loss of image quality, but the potential health hazard and cost of such a high-energy system precludes its permanent installation in most museum laboratories. Computed tomography (CT) can be very useful for three-dimensional X-ray imaging, but the cost of the instrumentation limits its use in museums, and there are relatively few commercial units capable of penetrating large solid objects made of high atomic weight materials, such as stone and metal. Publications documenting the use of this method tend to focus on studies of human or animal remains; hospital CT equipment has been used successfully for these and other low or moderate atomic weight materials, e.g., wood and ceramics.

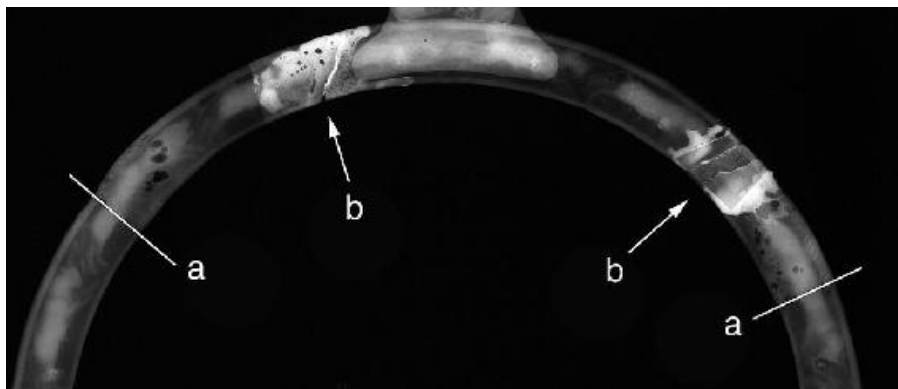


Figure 7.2 Radiograph showing cast-on section of rim, with boundaries between original cast and cast-on section indicated (a), and modern soldered repairs (b). Handles and rim of a cauldron. Provenience unknown; Cyprus, Late Bronze Age (ca. 1300–1050 BCE). Bronze; handles h. ca. 20.9, rim dia. 40.0 cm. The Cesnola Collection, Purchased by subscription, 1874–76. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.5685.

Image: D. Schorsch © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Radiography is also invaluable for detecting repairs and restorations. Modern synthetic resins used for reattaching and filling damages, as well as traditional ones such as shellac or hide glue, are substantially less radiopaque than the inorganic ancient materials they are used to repair. Conversely, solders used to repair metal objects are almost invariably more opaque and typically exhibit porosity that is visible in radiographs. Even when artifacts that are relatively radiotransparent are repaired with modern materials of similar atomic weight, differences in density between old and new, and gaps at joins not apparent to the unaided eye, can be recognized in radiographs.

Structural Analysis

Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy and Raman Spectroscopy

Museum laboratories use the complementary techniques of Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) and Raman spectroscopy to study a variety of natural and synthetic organic and inorganic materials, including pigments, corrosion products, resins, and plastics. In most cases, removal of a sample is required; each instrument is generally operated in tandem with an optical microscope, so that specific regions or features can be isolated for analysis,

but in most cases a sample is required. Both analytical methods study the characteristics of the molecular bonds present in the unknown compound. FTIR measures vibrational transitions associated with the absorption of energy by various bonds at characteristic wavelengths in the ultraviolet region. Vibrational transformations are also the basis of Raman microspectroscopy: a laser beam is used to irradiate the sample and the scattered photons are analyzed in the spectrometer. Scattering of specific wavelengths of monochromatic light in the visible, near infrared, and near ultraviolet range, and associated shifts in energy produced through interactions with vibrations, rotations, and other movement in the chemical bonds present can be observed. In both cases, analyses generally result in the identification of functional groups that are the building blocks of organic molecules rather than specific compounds. Although it can be ascertained, for example, that an oil or a protein is present, further analytical work is needed to achieve greater specificity.

Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectroscopy (GC-MS)

Spectra generated by FTIR and Raman spectroscopy can sometimes be identified by comparison with reference data, but in other cases, a separation technique such as gas chromatography coupled with mass spectroscopy (GC-MS) may be used to identify specific compounds by measuring atomic mass, correlating the data with types of bonds known to be present. GC and other separation techniques, such as high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC), can be used to disperse sample components within solid, liquid, or gaseous media so that they can be characterized and further studied.

X-ray Diffraction (XRD)

The development of X-ray diffraction analysis, which began in the nineteenth century, remains an effective method for identifying crystalline materials. For ancient Near Eastern art these include rocks and minerals, ceramic materials, pigments, corrosion products, and archaeological accretions ([Figure 7.3](#)). Every crystalline material is a solid comprised of atoms arranged in a three-dimensional repetitive grid that can be identified through its unique interactions with X-ray radiation. An unknown crystalline substance exposed to monochromatic X-ray radiation and rotated on its own axis will diffract light at fixed angles and associated intensities. The diffracted light is recorded and converted to numerical data, which reflect the shape of the grid and the distances between the atoms, and can be compared with reference data of known compounds. Analyses are generally carried out on small powder samples or thin sections, but with an open-architecture configuration, subject

to limitations of an object's size, shape, and heterogeneity, in situ scans are also possible.

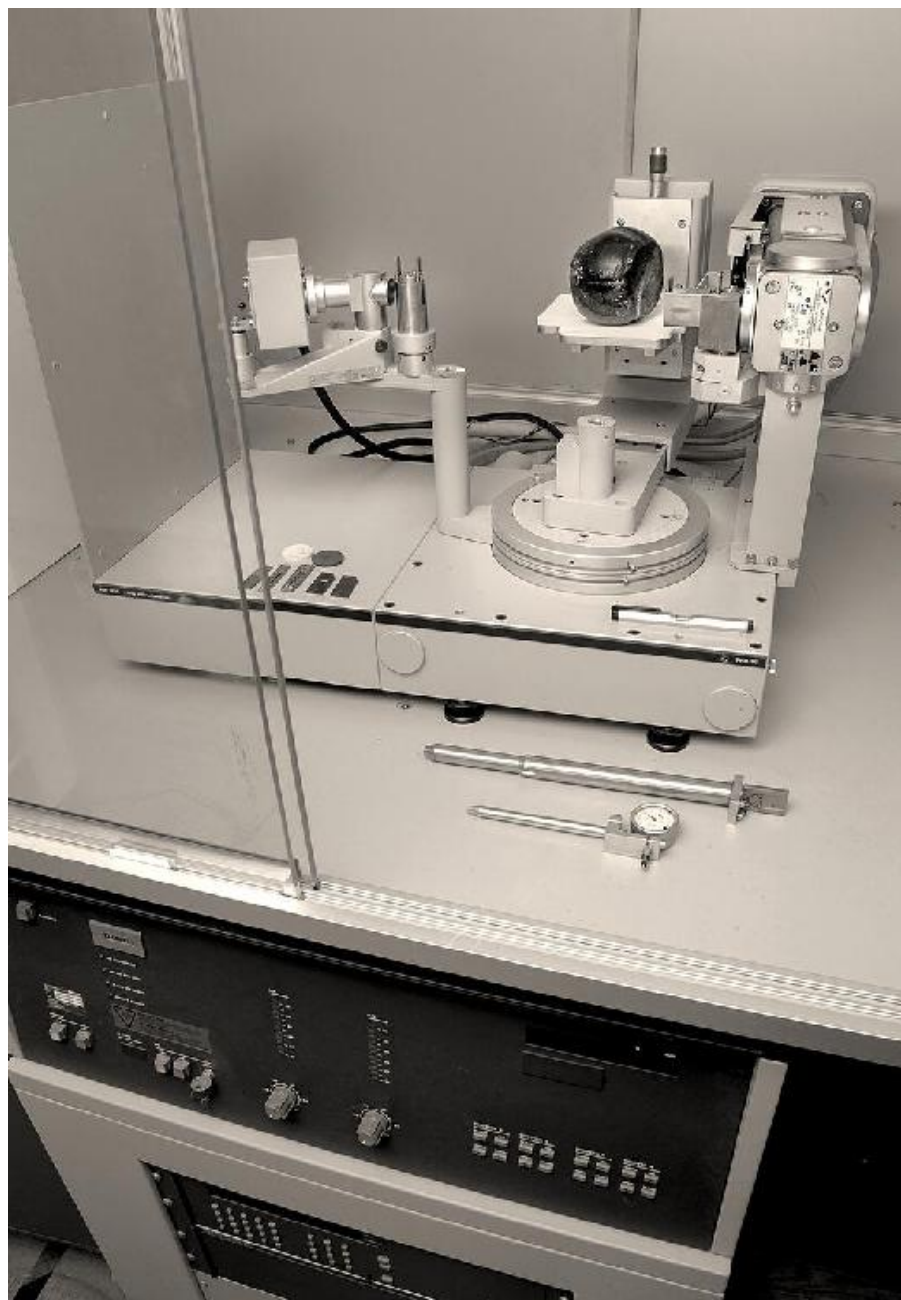


Figure 7.3 Stone identification using open architecture X-ray diffraction unit in progress. Unknown object. Nippur, Joint Expedition, American Schools of Oriental Research (Chicago), 1960–61, IT 350, Level XV, Inana Temple. Uruk period, late fourth millennium BCE. Black limestone; $7.2 \times 8.3 \times 9.1$ cm.

Elemental Analysis

All materials, natural and man-made, are made up of chemical elements in varying proportions, and very few are truly homogeneous. Most of the instruments museums employ for compositional analysis produce spectra of the X-rays characteristically emitted by each of the elements present in a sample when excited by a high-energy source. In graphic representations, the peaks indicate the energy or wavelength of an emission, their height being proportional to the relative amount of the corresponding element present. Depending on the instrumentation, operating conditions, and the substrate in question, the data may be qualitative or quantitative, and in the latter case, minimum detection limits will vary. Quantitative elemental data may be expressed as weight or atomic percent. Elements in glassy materials and minerals are generally reported in oxide weight percentages.

X-ray fluorescence (XRF) is the emission of characteristic secondary X-rays when a material is exposed to high energy X-ray radiation. In many museum laboratories, qualitative and quantitative elemental analyses are carried out on a full range of inorganic materials using stationary, portable, and even handheld X-ray fluorescence detectors. Analyses are typically done in situ on unprepared surfaces, which are often obscured by degradation products or disproportionately depleted of specific components, and therefore not necessarily representative of the substrate composition. On the other hand, these analyses can be quickly accomplished non-invasively, with relatively user-friendly instrumentation and software. Some models even allow precise selection and documentation of areas to be analyzed. Sensitivity is high, permitting the detection of trace elements as well as major and minor constituents. With proper preparation of the specimen, and by employing consistent operating conditions and appropriate standards, it is also possible to produce quantitative data using XRF.

Energy dispersive X-ray spectrometry (EDS) and wavelength dispersive X-ray spectrometry (WDS) also measure characteristic X-rays emitted by elements present. The detectors are typically coupled with a scanning electron microscope (SEM), which employs an electron beam to excite the sample. These instruments are frequently used in museum laboratories for quantitative compositional analyses of scrapings, drilled samples, and polished sections of metal or glass, cross-sections of paint layers, or thin sections of ceramics or stone. Surface analysis is also possible, but the objects must be small enough to fit inside the SEM sample chamber. Examination with the electron

microscope allows minute areas of interest and discrete particles to be identified, documented, and analyzed with little or no contamination from surrounding regions.

In recent years, other methods of elemental analysis such as inductively coupled plasma-mass spectroscopy (ICP) and particle induced X-ray emission spectroscopy (PIXE) have become more common in museum laboratories. Like XRF and EDS/WDS, PIXE measures the characteristic X-rays produced by the elements present, but uses a very high-energy ion beam from a particle accelerator to induce the X-ray emission. This technique can produce more information on trace elements than is possible using the XRF or EDS/WDS, but the instrumentation is too large to be accommodated in most museum laboratories. With ICP-MS, the analyses are carried out on a discrete sample, but unlike in the other techniques already mentioned here, the portion analyzed is vaporized and therefore not retained for confirmatory or future investigations. The ions thus produced are separated and quantified using a mass spectrometer, looking specifically for the elements of interest, and may measure concentrations as low as parts-per-billion or even less.

Material Identification and Manufacture

All matter, whether arising naturally or synthesized in the laboratory, is made up of chemical elements. In nature, elements may occur alone (i.e., in their so-called native state), but even then they are rarely pure, and more commonly are chemically bonded with other elements to form compounds. Copper (Cu) and sulfur (S) both occur in nature in elemental form, but are more readily found in wide range of compounds with each other—including, for example, chalcocite (Cu_2S), a copper sulfide mineral from which copper is refined, which can also be present as a corrosion product on archaeological cupreous alloys—or any in a wide range of other elements. Naturally occurring mixtures of sulfur and arsenic are the basis of two minerals used as pigments in ancient times: orpiment (As_2S_3) and realgar (As_2S_2), respectively yellow and orange-red.

All compounds may be classified as organic or inorganic; the former contain the element carbon (C). In the ancient world, with the exception of bituminous compounds, virtually all organic materials were derived from natural plant and animal sources. Some inorganic materials used in antiquity occur naturally, such as stone, but most are heavily processed (e.g., metals), either to extract them or otherwise render them usable, or are entirely synthetic formulations, such as glass. Pyrotechnological industries rely on the application of heat; refractory materials are those with very high melting points, such as glasses and ceramics. Ancient works of art often combined multiple materials varying in physical properties and origins.

Organic Materials

Ancient works of art were made from a wide range of natural organic materials, which have survived to greater or lesser degrees in differing archaeological environments. Compared with neighboring regions such as Egypt and Central Asia, Near Eastern sites have yielded relatively few intact objects made of wood or animal and vegetal fibers. Because these materials derive from formerly living organisms, in many cases they can be identified on the basis of their anatomy using visual methods. Because of their generally degraded condition, however, archaeological samples are more difficult to identify than recently harvested specimens.

In terms of manufacture, textiles and related products are probably the most complex works derived from organic materials. In addition to the broad range of animal and vegetal fibers exploited, many configurations and parameters describe the spinning, weaving, plaiting, and knotting structures used to produce textiles, basketry, ropes, etc. These features are generally characterized under low magnification following established conventions (Wild 2003), although radiographs of textiles can also be quite revealing of their structure (O'Connor and Brooks 2007). Pseudomorphs—corrosion products replicating the structure of organic fibers and structure—may be preserved on metal artifacts and are useful for identifying weaves and other features of manufacture as well as the nature of the fiber (Coho 1996). Samples mounted on microscope slides and viewed on a transmitted light polarizing microscope (PLM) can be identified by direct comparison with reference fibers on the basis of optical and visual qualities (Gale and Cutler 2000); scanning electron microscopy can also be useful, particularly to distinguish among fibers of related species.

Ancient textiles were dyed and occasionally painted. Dyestuffs were generally based on plant extracts, although much has been written about Tyrian purple, derived from a sea snail found in the eastern Mediterranean, and apparently first used by the Phoenicians and in later times associated with Roman imperial robes and Byzantine imperial manuscripts. Kermes, a red colorant derived from beetles, is mentioned in the Bible. Dyes are generally identified using liquid chromatography-mass spectroscopy (LC-MS) or HPLC, but recent advances have been made for dye analysis on single fibers, and other organic colorants, using surface enhanced Raman spectroscopy (SERS) (Casadio et al. 2010).

As noted earlier, few objects made from wood have survived from the ancient Near East. A notable exception is the elaborately inlaid wooden furniture found in Phrygian royal tumuli at Gordion, in modern Turkey, which has been studied in depth (Simpson 2010). In addition to species identification, wooden

artifacts can be characterized by means of extant tool marks, evidence of joining techniques, and surface finishing and embellishment.

Ivory, tooth, and bone have both organic and inorganic components, but usually only the inorganic matrix survives burial. Like wood and vegetal and animal fibers, these materials and the species from which they derive are identified visually on the basis of morphology, often under low magnification. Characteristic features, however, are often obscured by tool marks and poor preservation; degraded specimens, and those from rarely encountered species, may require special expertise or removal of a sample. Because of its obvious relationship to trade, the ancient range of the source animal populations is also a subject of much discussion (Gachet-Bizollon [2007](#)).

Non-cellular organic materials, such as the fossil resin amber, occasionally found in ancient Near Eastern contexts; resinous adhesives and fill materials, such as bitumen; and binding media used with paints are generally characterized using FTIR and identified with GC-MS. Bitumen that has been molded or modeled often contains stone temper, which may be identified using analytical methods suitable for these inorganic materials. The use of bitumen as a pigment has also been reported.

The approximate age of many biological organic materials can often be ascertained with radiocarbon dating. Simply stated, while they are alive, all organisms absorb carbon in stable and unstable isotopic forms in fixed proportions. When the organism dies, the unstable carbon-14 isotope undergoes radioactive decay, which alters the ratio between stable and unstable forms in a predictable and quantifiable manner. The age of a specimen, expressed as years before present (BP), is calculated from this ratio. Sample size varies with the type and condition of the material under examination and the instrumentation; analyses are generally carried out in specialized commercial laboratories. Only the date of the material itself, that is, the time when the organism died, can be determined. The workmanship that transformed it may have been added, or added to, at any time.

Stone

While the terms *rock* and *stone* are often used interchangeably, rock is more common in geological contexts, and stone for materials that have been gathered or altered for human use. Semiprecious stone, gemstone, and precious stone also have different meanings, depending on context. Stone is one of the inorganic materials most often encountered in collections of ancient Near Eastern art. These works range in scale from monumental (architectural elements) to tiny (beads and seals), and a great variety of stones were exploited for multiple purposes. Roger Moorey ([1994](#): 23, 35–36, *passim*) lists some dozens that were used in Mesopotamia for sculpture, vessels,

weapons, seals, jewelry, etc. Many of the identifications he mentions, however, as well as those published elsewhere in the archaeological or art historical literature, are based on macroscopic observations and not grounded in scientific method. Commonly cited for sculpture are limestone, marble, alabaster, basalt, and diorite. Smaller works, seals, jewelry, and other objects, were fashioned from numerous stones and semiprecious stones, including steatite, serpentine, calcite, chlorite, carnelian, lapis lazuli, agate, and chalcedony. Blades were typically made from stones with conchoidal fracture that can be knapped, such as flint and obsidian.

Minerals are naturally occurring crystalline materials that constitute rocks, which can be characterized as sedimentary, igneous, or metamorphic, depending on how they were initially formed and their subsequent geological history. Some, such as limestone and carnelian, may contain only a single mineral and have a fixed composition, but more often rocks are mineral mixtures, and their gross elemental composition varies with the types and amounts of species present. Sedimentary rocks are formed on the earth's surface through deposition by wind or water or from chemical precipitates, and igneous stones through volcanic (surface) and plutonic (subsurface) processes; metamorphic rocks are sedimentary and igneous rocks that have been altered by extremes of heat and pressure. Therefore, in bulk composition, if not structure, there can be a familial similarity between sedimentary (e.g., limestone) and igneous rocks (e.g., basalt) to their metamorphosed forms (marble and schist, respectively). Rock types of similar genesis often form continua and individual species are defined on the basis of the presence, abundance, size, and distribution of constituent minerals. For example, granite, granodiorite, and gabbro are all intrusive igneous rocks that are characterized by different relative abundance of constituent minerals, such as quartz and feldspar.

For these reasons, for stone identification scientists employ several visual and instrumental methods in tandem ([Figure 7.4](#)). Petrographic analysis of rocks prepared as thin sections is carried out using a transmitted light microscope equipped with plane-polarized light (PLM) and special filters. The examiner identifies the minerals present by their appearance (size, shape, and optical qualities, including color) and their frequency, distribution, and condition. X-ray diffraction (XRD) may be used to identify the individual minerals within a matrix. To aid identifications, elemental analyses are carried out using X-ray fluorescence (XRF) or energy dispersive and wavelength dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDS/WDS) in a scanning electron microscope or an electron microprobe (EMP), both of which also provide highly magnified images. Like other preferences regarding either natural or synthetic materials, the exploitation of a specific stone may reflect temporally, geographically, or culturally delimited industries, and provide insight into function or evidence of ancient trade.

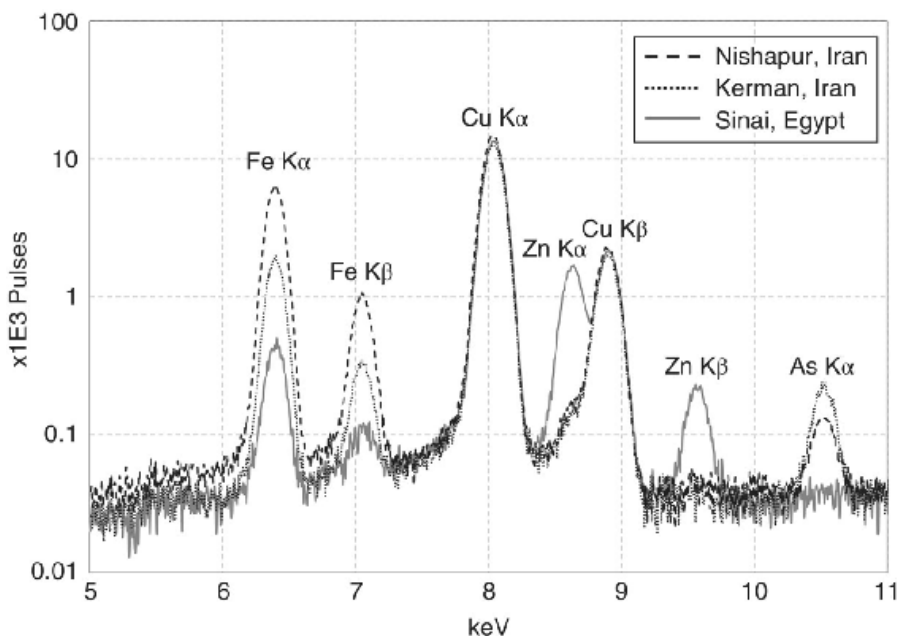


Figure 7.4 Spectra of turquoise specimens from the Sinai and from Nishapur and Kerman (eastern Iran) obtained using X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy. Ratios derived from these data have been used to establish the geological provenance of turquoise associated with artifacts from ancient and medieval Egyptian and Near Eastern contexts.

Image: F. Carò © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In antiquity, stone was shaped by percussion or carved with metal and stone tools, then polished using a sequence of coarser and then finer naturally occurring loose abrasives, such as sand. The SEM has been applied to the study of drill turnings and scratches left by surface abrasion, sometimes directly on small stone objects, sometimes on silicon impressions, which can be used to record otherwise inaccessible worked surfaces (e.g., Gorelick and Gwinnet 1983). Since tool marks produced by modern stone-carving tools are quite similar to ancient ones, recognizing forgeries or modern alterations, particularly on hard stones, is challenging. Anna Serotta (2014) pioneered the use of reflectance transformation imaging and other imaging techniques to document and build up a library of tool marks on ancient Egyptian statuary from excavated contexts for comparison with those observed on works of uncertain authenticity.

Ceramics

Most ceramics from the ancient Near East are clay-based. Clays are mixtures of aluminum silicate rock particles, primarily very fine laminae that when mixed with water slide over each other and exhibit a degree of plasticity that allows the clay to be rolled, extruded, thinned, thrown, and otherwise formed by mechanical pressure. Non-plastic tempers, often ground fired clay (grog), rock fragments, or organic materials, are added to the clay beforehand to reduce shrinkage that typically occurs during drying. When the clay is leather hard, it is heated, first to vaporize residual water, and then, as the kiln temperature rises, to drive off water chemically bonded to the clay particles. Firing is complete when the clay particles sinter, or fuse. Fired ceramic wares vary widely in hardness, strength, friability, and color.

In the ancient Near East, vessels, human and animal figures, and architectural tiles and cones were the most common types of clay-based ceramics.² Figures, cones, and tiles were generally modeled by hand or in molds. Vessels were formed by hand using methods such as pinching or were built from slabs or coils; beginning around 3500 BCE, they were thrown, that is, pulled up from a lump of prepared clay centered on a rotating potter's wheel. Evidence of different forming methods, clay bodies, and joins between separately formed components is often visible in X-ray radiographs (Lang and Middleton 2005: 60–81). Xeroradiography, a technique by which conventional radiographic images are processed on paper using a selenium plate, was successfully applied to a technical study of ceramic wares starting in the 1970s, but it has since been superseded by new digital methods for capturing radiographic data.

Ceramic production in the ancient Near East exhibits a wide range of common ceramic technological practices relating to finishing and decoration. Some works were burnished before firing to produce a compact and glossy surface. Decorative and figurative motifs were applied by scoring, stamping, modeling, etc. (Shepard 1965: 186–203). Clay bodies were coated with slips—suspensions of clay particles in water that are generally of a finer particle size or different in color from the underlying clay body—and burnished, or they were used to apply mono- or polychrome ornamentation. Vitreous layers, known as glazes, were generally not applied to ceramic bodies before the first millennium BCE. They are discussed below, along with faience and other vitreous materials.

Clays represent millennia of deterioration of a number of different rocks, followed by varied patterns of transport and deposition, and thus they can vary in mineral content, trace elements, and texture. Physical characterization of clay bodies is largely accomplished with the same methods used for stone: visual analysis of polished thin sections; XRD to determine the mineral species present; and elemental analysis (SEM-EDS-WDS, PIXE, XRF) to confirm or elaborate visual and structural analyses. Most ancient Near Eastern ceramic bodies are earthen- or stonewares; the former are fired at lower temperatures and are less dense, coarser, and weaker than the latter. They

usually contain iron and are therefore yellow, orange, or red when fired under oxidizing conditions. Because the constituent minerals in fired clay are often high-temperature species of the original ingredients that are formed at fixed temperatures, their presence sometimes allows the firing temperature of a ceramic to be determined.

At the elevated temperatures attained when the clay is fired, energy that has been continuously absorbed from the environment and stored in the atomic structure of certain mineral species is released in a form of visible light known as thermoluminescence (TL). Thereafter, the clock is “reset” as the intake of radiation resumes. Absolute dates can be calculated from the amount of energy emitted when subsurface samples removed in the absence of visible light are heated under controlled conditions, because the amount of thermoluminescence released is directly proportional to the date they were last heated, which in most instances corresponds to the time they were first produced. This is the basis for TL dating, which is widely used in the study of geological materials and sometimes applied to museum ceramics that are particularly difficult to date, or, more frequently, suspected forgeries (Aitken, Moorey, and Ucko [1971](#)). TL is also often used to date furnaces, casting cores, and other refractory materials related to ancient metallurgical industries. Few art museums have the necessary equipment for TL analysis and most turn to independent laboratories.

Glasses and Glazed Materials

Glasses belong to a class of materials known as supercooled liquids. Ancient glasses were produced using mixtures of two common crystalline materials: silicon dioxide (SiO_2 , often in the form of sand or ground quartzite) and calcium carbonate (CaO_2 , often derived from limestone), with an alkali such as natron or potash, which when fused at elevated temperatures produce an amorphous and generally heterogeneous mass. Potash, a plant-based alkali, was generally used in glasses from the Near East produced prior to the first millennium BCE. Various inorganic compounds are added as colorants and opacifiers; transparent ancient glass with no added colorants has a greenish tinge, which derives from iron impurities. Because many significant elements are leached from the glass during burial, in order to attain accurate measurements of bulk composition, analyses must be carried out on subsurface samples that present nondegraded surfaces. Most technical studies of ancient glass focus on elemental composition, which has produced much data relating to locations of workshops and sources of raw materials (Janssens [2013](#)). The most commonly used methods for compositional analyses are SEM-EDS-WDS and PIXE. The imaging capabilities provided by scanning electron microscopes and microprobes allow the localization of different

phases and unreacted raw materials, including particles of pigments and opacifiers, and other crystalline constituents. Laser ablation induced coupled plasma spectroscopy (LA-ICP-MS) has proved helpful for identifying trace elements in very low concentrations but, as noted earlier, entails the sample's destruction. XRD is useful in identifying crystalline inclusions.

The production of vitreous materials in the ancient Near Eastern world began around 1500 BCE; the corpus of surviving early glass artifacts, when compared with neighboring Egypt, for example, is relatively small. Glass was used principally for vessels or smaller objects such as beads, scarabs, seals, and inlays and other applied decorative elements, which were produced primarily in molds or, in the case of vessels, rolled over a sand core. The earliest blown glasses in the Near East date to Hellenistic times.

Glazes are vitreous layers applied using different methods to ceramic, faience, or stone substrates and fused in place.³ Among stones, steatite, which is easily carved and has good thermal properties, was particularly popular. Direct methods of application include brushing and immersion. Faience is non-plastic composite material containing traditional glass-forming components (SiO_2 , CaO_2 , alkali) that when wetted can be modeled, molded, and carved. During firing the silica particles sinter, or fuse, to produce a solid granular mass. In addition to brushing and immersion, indirect efflorescence and cementation processes are also used to apply faience glazes. As with faience, the manufacture of glazed steatite artifacts from Egypt has received more attention than those produced elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean world (Tite and Bimson 1989).

Plaster

From earliest times in the Near East, plaster was an important material used for non-structural architectural features, including as a ground for wall paintings; and for sculpture, notably the Neolithic anthropomorphic figures from 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan (Grissom 2000). It was also important in developing other pyrotechnological industries (Kingery, Vandiver, and Prickett 1988). Ancient plasters were made from calcium carbonate or calcium sulfate and sometimes a mixture of the two, with the addition of other lithics that would reduce shrinkage when the plaster dried. Frequently, as with the 'Ain Ghazal statues, organic materials provided internal support. Lime plaster is manufactured by heating limestone to remove carbon dioxide, thereby converting it to anhydrous calcium oxide (quicklime). In a process known as slaking, water is added to the quicklime. The slaked lime hardens as the water evaporates and slowly reacts with carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to reform calcium carbonate. Similarly, gypsum plaster, the basis for plaster of Paris, is produced by heating ground calcium sulfate. When water is

reintroduced, the mixture is rapidly reconverted to a solid hydrated calcium sulfate with the evolution of heat.

Metals

The most important metals used in the ancient Near East are gold, silver, copper, tin, lead, and iron. Gold and copper, both of which occur in the region in native form, were the first to be exploited. Copper was soon thereafter smelted from ores. Copper smelted from less pure ores that contained arsenic were recognized as superior, and such ores were selectively exploited. Arsenic-copper alloys are more easily cast and could be hammered after casting to produce harder and more durable tools and weapons. Bronze alloys, by definition mixtures of copper and tin, gradually replaced arsenical copper. In later periods, leaded bronzes came into use. Silver, which occurs more rarely in native form, first appeared in the Near East early in the third millennium BCE. Lead weights were used for commerce, fishing, and weaving.

Most metals are processed mechanically or chemically to extract them from ores containing other metals or nonmetallic elements. Because they derive from imperfect smelting processes, ancient alloys and unalloyed metals invariably contain impurities, whose absence strongly suggests modern falsification. Popular analytical methods employed in museums to determine alloy composition and the presence of trace elements include XRF, EDS/WDS, PIXE, and ICP. Nearly all processes subsequently employed for fabricating, joining, and embellishing metalwork may be designated as metallurgical (i.e., pyrotechnological) or mechanical. The two basic methods of fabrication were casting and hammering.

Gold, silver, and copper melt at 1064, 962, and 1085 degrees Celsius; for this reason they are generally alloyed, or mixed with other metals, to lower their melting points. Alloying can also be used to alter physical properties such as color, hardness, and viscosity when molten, and, in the case of copper, to reduce gases dissolved in the melt that can cause excessive porosity in the cast. Simple uni- and bivalve fixed molds, generally made from fine-grained materials resistant to thermal shock, especially steatite, serpentine, and clay, were used to cast utilitarian objects, such as weapons and tools, as well as figurines and other relatively flat shapes. The molds were reused until they broke. Lost-wax casting techniques allowed the production of truly three-dimensional forms. Lost-wax casts can be produced using direct and indirect methods and may be solid or hollow (Dillon 2002). The precocious production of hollow casts is attested already at the late fourth-millennium site of Nahal Mishmar in Israel (Bar-Adon 1980), and is well illustrated by several examples of ambitious works from the Akkadian period (De Lapérouse 2003)

(see [Figure 26.1](#) in Emberling and Hanson, this volume). Much technical research has focused on refining techniques and compositional and isotopic analysis, with less emphasis on manufacturing techniques. Recent exceptions include studies of the Middle Elamite (fourteenth century BCE) statue of Queen Napir-Asu from Susa (Meyers [2000](#)) and Late Bronze Age Cypriot tripods and amphorae (Schorsch and Hendrix [2004](#)).

All lost-wax casting processes begin with a wax model (including a gating system) invested in a plastic refractory material, which in antiquity was generally a mixture of clay, sand, and organic matter with water. When the investment has dried it is fired to make it strong enough to withstand the force of molten metal and to melt out the wax. The metal is poured and after it has solidified, the cast, which is identical to the original model, is broken out of the investment. For hollow casts, wax sheets are applied onto a core made of a similar refractory mixture.

Iron appeared considerably later than gold, silver, and copper, with consistent production beginning in the second half of the second millennium BCE. Iron melts at 1538 degrees Celsius, which exceeds the highest temperatures attained in furnaces in Mediterranean antiquity. Iron was shaped by forging, or repeated heating in a furnace followed by hammering while hot; similarly, separate pieces of iron could easily be joined by hot forging to form larger units. A welcome consequence of these processes is the characteristic absorption of carbon by the iron at elevated temperatures to form mild steel, which is harder than unalloyed iron. Gold, silver, and copper were hammered at room temperature, alternately with a heat treatment known as annealing, which returned the work-hardened metal to its characteristic malleable state. Hammered sheets were joined mechanically, or, in the case of precious metals, using metallurgical methods such as hard soldering or colloidal hard soldering.

Mercury, a metal that is liquid at room temperature, is the basis for amalgam (fire) gilding, which was developed in China and appeared in the Mediterranean world in the later first millennium BCE. Before the advent of mercury gilding, gold was applied to silver and cupreous substrates using mechanical methods, such as crimping, and also probably with organic adhesives. The latter is speculative because such adhesives rarely survive and often have been contaminated, making them difficult to identify using available instrumental methods. The application of gold to silver substrates by hammering alternating with heating has been demonstrated for several ancient Near Eastern contexts (Oddy [1993](#)).

Radiography is an important technique for the study of ancient metalwork (Lang and Middleton [2005](#): 33–59). Metallurgical examination entails the removal of a sample that is polished to achieve a specular surface. Etching can reveal the metal's grain structure, indicating whether it was produced by casting or hammering, and whether it was subsequently subjected to a heat

treatment or mechanical deformation; specific features, such as tool marks, joins, and surface coatings, may be investigated. The presence or absence of intergranular corrosion is considered an important factor in judging the authenticity of cupreous metals. Methods for identifying and dating ceramic materials are applied to the clay-based casting cores inside hollow-cast metal objects. Elemental analyses using a variety of methods have been carried out on metalwork, especially cupreous artifacts, to recognize patterns of alloying and investigate sources of raw materials. Most ancient cultures—certainly in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean region—followed the same progression from unalloyed copper to arsenical copper, bronze (copper-tin), and leaded bronze successively, and then in the Roman period, brass. Still, production of older alloys continued even as newer mixtures were introduced locally or in neighboring cultures. The evolution of technological practices is periodically disrupted by isolated occurrences of the “avantgarde” or the resurgence of antiquated processes.

Pigments and Painting

Although works of art from the ancient Near East with fully preserved polychromy are rare, traces of paint can be observed on a variety of substrates, such as stone and plaster-based materials (including statuary, wall paintings, and architectural elements), ivory and bone, pottery (applied after firing), and wood. Ancient paints generally were composed of one or more colorants, such as a pigment, or dye precipitated onto an inorganic substrate, and a binder. Few technical investigations of pigments from ancient Near Eastern contexts have been published, although the literature on pigments that are mentioned in ancient texts is quite extensive. More or less in keeping with traditions in neighboring regions, most surviving pigments are finely ground minerals; in some cases these species are the same ores that were refined to produce iron and copper.

Pigments reported for Near Eastern contexts include the so-called iron earths, essentially mixtures of silica and clay containing iron oxide(s) in different hydration states that offer a range of colors. For example, the minerals hematite (Fe_2O_3) and goethite ($\alpha\text{FeO}(\text{OH})$), respectively, are the primary colorants in red and yellow ochers. Furthermore, massive specimens of hematite were ground to produce a more intense red pigment. The red and yellow arsenical sulfides, realgar (AgS) and orpiment (Ag_2S_3), have also been reported. For blue, the earliest known synthetic pigment, Egyptian blue, a fritted and ground mixture of silicon, calcium, and copper analogous to the mineral cuprorivaite ($\text{CaCuSi}_4\text{O}_{10}$), was used. Relatively few occurrences of green paint have been cited. Black paints were generally carbon-based, derived from the combustion of a range of materials, including oils, wood,

bone, and ivory, along with the occasional use of bitumen (Hendrix 2001), which has also been found on early ceramics. Calcium carbonate (CaCO_3), derived from limestone or calcite, was used as a white pigment. Although gypsum plaster was used for modeling as early as the Neolithic period, and in wall paintings as a ground layer, it has been rarely reported as a pigment. Most ancient pigments are inorganic crystalline compounds and as such have traditionally been identified with polarized light microscopy, based on their physical properties, and XRD, often guided by compositional analysis. Studies also employ FTIR and Raman spectroscopy, however, are increasingly used for pigment identification and characterization.

Conclusions

Works of art have traditionally been collected first and foremost for their aesthetic qualities, and they can be approached and appreciated on the basis of their beauty alone. Whereas this is a valid and enjoyable pursuit, seeing these works as reflections of the human context in which they were produced is another matter. Scholarly investigations of social, historical, and political trends have joined style and iconography—the traditional underpinnings of art historical study—to allow educated viewers to recognize broader cultural statements, and an essential adjunct to these tools is the characterization of materials and manufacture. Technical investigations of the physical evidence that reflects material choices—processing of materials; methods of manufacture; and wear and damages, with their relationship to use and reuse—are requisite for a more holistic “art history.” But like all material culture, works of art are not merely abstractions rendered in corporeal form: each one represents a unique *physical* interaction between the artist and his chosen materials during the acts of fashioning and embellishing.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Bowman 1991 is a basic text written by members of the British Museum Research Laboratory, one of the most active museum laboratories in the world. Emery 1966 is a standard work for textile specialists. The introduction to Janssens and van Grieken 2004 is for the general reader; descriptions of instrumentation with numerous case studies require a strong science background. Kealey and Haines 2002 provide a good general introduction to theory and techniques of physical analysis, suitable for readers with a strong science background. Although not specifically geared to the ancient world,

Kingery and Vandiver 1986 is a good introduction to the technology of ceramic works of art, including faience.

Smith 1981 is a collection of essays by the scholar who pioneered the study of technological style with respect to works of art.

Schorsch 2014a offers an introduction to the study of ancient metalwork in museum laboratories.

With special reference to the ancient Near East, Potts 2012 includes surveys of the technologies of ceramic production, metallurgy, glass, and textiles.

For Raman spectroscopy, see the *Journal of Raman Spectroscopy*.

Proceedings of “Raman Spectroscopy in Archaeology and Art History” conferences appear in volumes issued in even-numbered years starting in 2006.

Online databases include Art and Archaeology Technical Abstracts (AATA) <http://aata.getty.edu/Home> and Bibliographic Database of the Conservation Information Network (BCIN) http://www.bcin.ca/English/home_english.html (also available in French).

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NOTES

- 1 See <http://culturalheritageimaging.org/>.
- 2 Clay was also used for tablets, sealings, and other substrates employed for writing, but these artifacts were generally unfired. Since these objects can be very fragile, many specimens housed in museums were fired in modern times to halt deterioration.
- 3 The process of applying vitreous layers to metal substrates is enameling, first unequivocally attested in the Mediterranean world in Greek times.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Gender and Sexuality

John D. M. Green

Introduction

Gender and sexuality in the ancient Near East is an immense topic, chiefly because of the vast corpus of visual images and availability of written sources. Most studies to date have thus limited their scope to specific regions, sites, or chronological periods. Attempts at identifying human, animal, or mythological subjects of gendered images have focused on specific deities or their symbols, frequently utilizing textual sources for identification and interpretation (e.g., Keel and Uehlinger 1998). This deductive approach to the gendered image includes efforts to classify and categorize images into binary male/female categories, and less frequently, “third genders” (Schroer 2006). A few synthetic studies situate their findings within wider theoretical and methodological frameworks (Bahrani 2001; Bolger 2008). Prehistoric studies draw upon archaeological context and ethnographic analogy to understand better the gendered image, exploring the phenomenological role of images as material culture within social and political arenas (see Croucher 2012). Considerable gaps remain between studies of visual images, texts, and archaeological contexts.

In Near Eastern art, the main focus for the study of gender and sexuality is the human image, although numerous examples of gendered symbols known from texts may not be rendered in human form. Examples include the plowed field (female) and the plow (male) in love and sex poetry (Leick 2003); attribute-animals of male or female deities, such as Hadad (bull) and Ishtar (lion) (Black and Green 1998); and gendered materials such as carnelian (female) and lapis (male) in early Mesopotamian birthing traditions (Winter 1999). These examples reveal hidden meanings of some images and objects that might not immediately appear physically gendered, but may be imbued with maleness and/or femaleness.

Investigation of gendered images cannot be pursued without incorporating modern attitudes to sex and gender, which include androcentric and Orientalist Western biases as well as gynocentric responses from the 1970s onward. The study of ancient Near Eastern art was initially male-dominated, from the “Father of Assyriology” Austen Henry Layard in the mid-nineteenth century to Henri Frankfort in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1940s, female scholars, including Elizabeth Douglas Van Buren, Edith Porada, and Helene

Kantor, began to make an impact. Porada in particular mentored a generation of influential female specialists in the field. The current Edith Porada Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art at Columbia University, Zainab Bahrani, opened up new challenges and avenues for the study of the gendered image in her pioneering *Women of Babylon* (2001). As one of the few art historians of the ancient Near East who writes on gender and sexuality, she follows the academic impact of feminism and its “three waves” (2001: 14–25). Academic studies began in the 1970s to trace the historical development of subordinate gender relations, patriarchal domination, and female subjugation by men. In archaeology, however, gendered approaches and the integration of female narratives lagged far behind (Conkey and Gero 1991). Irene J. Winter (1987) and Susan Pollock (1991) contributed early to gender studies in ancient Near Eastern art, highlighting limited or ambiguous images of women (Bahrani 2001: 121–23). Gender-related studies in the field have increased significantly (e.g., Bolger 2008; Hamilton, Whitehouse, and Wright 2007; Nakhai 2008; Parpola and Whiting 2002; Schroer 2006). Recent investigations have introduced more holistic approaches toward gender relations and dynamics, an interest in bodies and embodiment, and the performance and social reproduction of gender as one of many subjective identities. Gender ambiguity and variance, or masculinist and queerist perspectives, have thus far received little scholarly attention (Burgh 2004; Knapp 1998; McCaffrey 2002: 387–88).

Bahrani (2001: 25–27) acknowledges a need for a methodology for studying gender that better suits the historical, archaeological, and art historical record and pays close attention to ancient context and multiple strands of evidence. Diane Bolger (2008: 3–5) exemplifies a trend toward mainstreaming gender into broader research paradigms—a shift from “feminist-inspired” to “humanist-inspired” approaches within archaeology. She proposes a deep-time (*Annaliste*) archaeological perspective on gender and trajectories of social change. Yet the role of images themselves in constructing and reproducing gendered identity is seldom explored. Who were the image producers? Who commissioned gendered images? How and where were gendered images consumed, and by whom?

Making and Breaking the Mother Goddess Paradigm

Associations between fertility symbols and early agricultural societies, and attitudes to gender and sexuality in the ancient Near East, can be traced to classical and biblical sources, reemerging within Western thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hutton 1997). Herodotus’s account of temple prostitution in Babylonia (*Histories* I.199), Eve’s temptation in the

garden of Eden described in Genesis [chapter 3](#), and literary revisions of the Arabian Nights, all helped create exotic, feminized visions of the Near East that were contrasted with male-dominated Western civilization (Bahrani [2001](#): 161–79). The Neo-Assyrian palace sculptures discovered by French and British archaeologists in the mid-nineteenth century also revealed a male-dominated image repertoire that contrasted with the classical world’s well-known representations of idealized male and female beauty.

The modern concept of a universal, ancient Mother Goddess emerged in the nineteenth century (Bachofen [1861](#); Dieterich [1905](#)). It entered Near Eastern archaeology with W. Ramsay’s identification of a Phrygian “Mater kubile,” cementing the notion of a primordial Anatolian mother goddess (Roller [1999](#): 12). In an early reference to a prehistoric universal goddess, Max von Oppenheim ([1933](#): 115–16) conflated figurines of “squatting women” of the Halaf period (ca. 6500–5500 BCE) with Iron Age sculptures also recovered from Tell Halaf, identifying them as the “Great Goddess” or mother of the gods. In the 1930s, Max Mallowan also identified the “Mother Goddess” at the site of Chagar Bazar ([Figure 8.1](#)), where female figurines were erroneously associated with model birthing stools (Mallowan [1936](#): 19–20, pl. I). These discoveries and interpretations helped construct a Mother Goddess paradigm in Near Eastern archaeology that endured throughout much of the twentieth century.¹



Figure 8.1 Female figurine. Syria, Chagar Bazar; ca. 5500 BCE. Ceramic; 9.7 × 5 cm. Ashmolean Museum AN1936.90.

© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists also integrated into their theories images from the ancient world, including the Near East. Sigmund Freud followed archaeology and ancient art through his own collections of antiquities, which included female and male figurines from the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean (Ucko 2001: 278, 286–87). Such images were also used in the interwar period to illustrate current psychological and sociological theories, and helped reinforce reductionist ideas of a universal Mother Goddess. Carl Jung ([1934–54] 1981) used the term “The Great Mother” as a psychoanalytical archetype common to all cultures throughout time and space, influencing the art-historical interpretations of Henri Frankfort ([1954] 1996; Taylor 2011: 8), psychologist and philosopher Erich Neumann ([1955] 1972), and mythologist Joseph Campbell (2013).

In the 1950s and 1960s, James Mellaart’s excavations at the Neolithic sites of Hacilar and Çatalhöyük, Turkey, marked a new stage in the Mother Goddess theory. Images of seated figures with large breasts and buttocks who were apparently pregnant, in the process of giving birth, or holding infants, were famously identified as goddesses (Mellaart 1967: 180, 202–3). Mellaart further proposed that the goddess held sway over life and death; as creators of Neolithic religion, women were therefore preeminent in Neolithic society. He also argued that the goddess cult continued into historical periods (see also Cauvin 2000: 29–31).

Despite challenges to this interpretation, such as the suggestion that the figurines were toys or images used in sympathetic magic (Ucko 1968: 427–44; 1996), the Mother Goddess paradigm became an important element in emerging feminist thought of the 1970s and 1980s. Marija Gimbutas (1984) famously placed the Mother Goddess at the heart of Near Eastern and European Neolithic religion. Yet New Age feminist authors of “goddess books” also distorted and selected archaeological evidence, as chauvinistic males had previously (Meskell 1995; Russell 1998: 264–65).

Although features of pregnancy and childbirth were central to the motherhood aspect of the goddess theory, many figures present ambiguous features that make it difficult to identify them as male or female, or to distinguish between obesity and pregnancy (Voigt 2000). Alternatively, the Neolithic female figurines have been seen as representing status or symbols of the community’s economic and social structure (at Çatalhöyük) or illustrating a cross-section of ages and poses, including the life stages of youth, childbearing, and old age (at Hacilar, contemporary with the later phase of Çatalhöyük). With few symbols or poses to indicate divinity, they may personify individual women, female archetypes, or ancestors. They could also stand for female activities, serve as teaching devices to initiate young women into the community (Roller 1999: 31, 35–36), or as puppets or apotropaic devices to ward off difficulties in childbirth (Russell 1998: 266–67).

There has also been a tendency to overinterpret structural oppositions at

Çatalhöyük as ideational gendered opposition, and read into them other dualisms, such as domestic and wild. For example, Jacques Cauvin (2000: 238) viewed the woman (female figurines) and the bull (representations of bull horns) as images “destined to represent the divine couple.” Such dualistic constructions could result from their material visibility, but these modern constructs should be reconsidered within the contexts of kinship and family life in which the images were created (Croucher 2012: 195). Recent studies have reconfirmed the problems of the Mother Goddess paradigm, focusing on the materiality of representation and ritualized contexts to inform gendered meanings—rejecting simplistic notions that the figures stand for deities (Meskell et al. 2008).

New interpretations of the female images also reappraise their relative frequency. Mellaart (1967: 203) declared that female terracotta figurines at Çatalhöyük outnumbered males by at least a ratio of 3:1, labeling one-quarter of the forty-one published sculptures as “gods” rather than “goddesses.” Typically, the less prominent male counterpart “deity” (Mellaart 1967: 178–203, pls. 84–91) has received less attention. Recent studies argue that earlier narratives relating to Neolithic gendered images focused disproportionately on female imagery. In fact, at Çatalhöyük female images may be rare compared with male-associated imagery. Only 40 out of 1,800 figurines found there are clearly identifiable as female (Hodder and Meskell 2011: 237).

New discoveries at the early Neolithic (ca. 9500–7500 BCE) site of Göbekli Tepe have further shifted interpretations away from the idea of a primordial Mother Goddess. Monumental images carved on upright T-shaped pillars include anthropomorphic figures and wild animals, large phalluses, and other features associated with male identity. Emerging evidence for phallocentrism (both human and animal) within the early Neolithic Near East has prompted the suggestion that these T-shaped pillars may themselves represent phalluses (Hodder and Meskell 2011). Karina Croucher (2012: 177–200) has also emphasized the growing evidence for masculine forms and symbols as part of a suite of images and symbols created within Neolithic society. She proposes that material choice and production techniques for gendered images may have been important, with female figures formed by hand from pliable materials such as clay, and male images carved from materials such as stone. This distinction could reflect the more immediate domestic production of clay female images, and manufacture of more durable stone images for rituals associated with elder males. Although most anthropologists and archaeologists now reject the Mother Goddess as a type-fossil, the paradigm remains highly influential among art historians, contemporary artists, archaeomythologists, and the general public.

The Emerging Male in Mesopotamian Narrative Art

The Uruk Vase provides an iconic example of Mesopotamian visual culture from the first urban centers. Approximately one meter in height and carved from gypsum-alabaster, its detailed scenes are arranged in stacked registers in an early example of narrative art. At its base are wavy lines denoting water, above which are floral motifs, followed by alternating rams and ewes. In the central register are naked male offering-bearers carrying vessels. The top register depicts the culmination of offerings to a clothed female figure with horned headdress (Figure 8.2; see also Figure 11.1 in Collins, this volume). She stands in front of a pair of standards symbolizing the sanctuary entrance, behind which are offerings and symbols. The female figure, usually identified as a goddess, receives offerings from a naked offering-bearer who strides in front of a larger, clothed figure, usually identified as the male ruler.

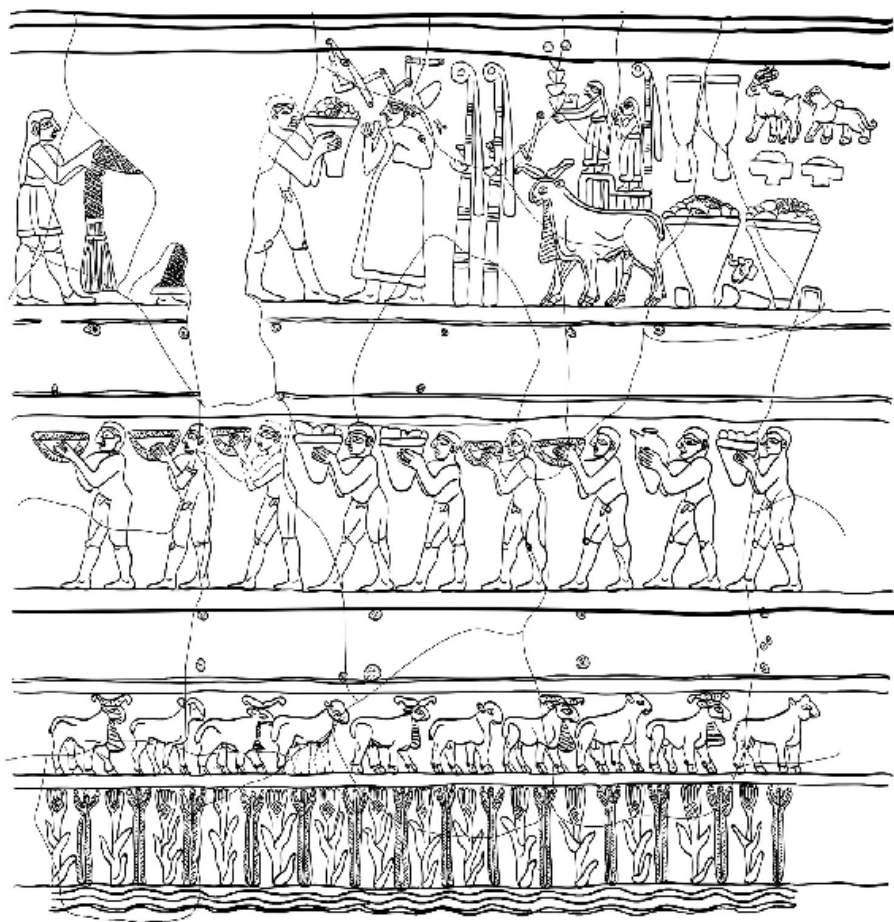


Figure 8.2 Drawing, Uruk Vase. Uruk (modern Warka); Late Uruk period, ca. 3300–3000 BCE.

From P. Lindemeyer and L. Martin, *Kleinfunde im Vorderasiatischen Museum zu Berlin*,

Soon after its discovery, the culminating scene was integrated into studies of ancient Near Eastern art (Frankfort [1954] 1996: 27) and later reassessed by Pierre Amiet (1980: 92–95). Along with attempts to identify specific figures and reconstruct ritual performance, the images continue to fuel debate about the status, power, and role of women and men in early urban societies. Scholars have also exhaustively debated whether the scene symbolically represents a “sacred marriage” ritual between the deities Dumuzi and Inana (through their mortal representatives), as described in much later texts (Cooper 1993; Steinkeller 1999; Bahrani 2002: 18 n.7; Suter 2014).

Better-preserved comparisons help identify the male figure in a similar pose and costume (typically a beard and cap), often designated the “man in the net skirt.” This individual has been interpreted as a ruler of archaic Uruk mentioned in Early Dynastic texts by the word **en** or **en Unug** meaning “lord of Uruk” (Steinkeller 1999: 110), a political and cultic leader, and warrior and hunter imbued with masculinity (Pollock and Bernbeck 2000). Within Mesopotamia, such aspects continue in representations of male rulers well into the first millennium.

While the Uruk Vase depicts a peaceful ceremony, the male ruler also appears in scenes of physical coercion and military conquest. Late Uruk-period cylinder seals show naked, bound (apparently male) captives and the “man in the net skirt.” These are precursors of later conquest images, such as the Early Dynastic Stele of the Vultures and the “Standard of Ur.” The Akkadian Stele of Naram-Sin (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume) emphasizes the ruler’s adorned and muscular male body, contrasted with the smaller, naked figures of defeated enemies below him. Such alluring male images embodied notions of masculinity, power, and virility (Winter 1996; Suter 2012). These expressions of male military and political power have commonalities: they present the male figure within a narrative scene, usually in a dominant role, or alongside defeated and humiliated enemies: emblematic of the militarism and rituals that helped cement his role. Images of male rulers in the later Ur III period emphasize features of heroic masculinity and power, including muscular arms, a wide chest (nude or partially exposed), and broad shoulders. Such images can be contrasted directly in dress, hairstyle, and bodily form with contemporary images of female elites (Suter 2012: 439).

Texts from the third and early second millennia describe how the king symbolically “marries” the goddess on a recurring, periodic basis, presumably to assure agricultural fertility and preserve the status quo. They describe the culmination of the New Year (spring) festival in which the king approaches the goddess Inana (or her mortal representative) with offerings, followed by sexual intercourse within her shrine as part of a symbolic marriage rite.² Linking the Uruk Vase with much later texts risks a circular reasoning

whereby the image reinforces the interpretation of the textual sources, and vice versa (Assante 2009). Moreover, it can be argued that despite its lack of overt sexual imagery the Uruk Vase has become a sexualized object in modern times through its “sacred marriage” association. The vase’s key figures also concern status and social dynamics between men and women, and the emergence of political and economic power in early urban societies. The scene can be seen as a “socially regulated marriage relationship” between the king and the divine realm, with wider sociological significance: “this is no random copulation to encourage fertility, but rather a sexual relationship in a carefully circumscribed context that entails a whole network of obligations between the partners and their kin” (Cooper 1993: 91–92).

Others view new urban male elites in the Uruk period as reformers and repressors of women’s status, while at the same time elevating certain images of women in ceremonial or cultic settings, as with the Uruk Vase, to legitimize their rule (Wright 2007: 227). Thus elite activities and works of art such as the Uruk Vase may have helped regulate or restrict female images within official ritual settings.

Although the Uruk Vase is often considered an icon of Late Uruk art, its imagery is exceptional. Very few objects in this period depict female elites or images of women in high status positions, either individually or alongside men (e.g., Amiet 1980: 92–95, pl. 45). As Bahrani (2001: 123) observes, “The point is that Woman is an important construct woven into a narrative of masculinity in order that normative masculine discourse can constitute itself by means of alterity and/or exclusion.” Thus the elite male enhances his masculinity through opposition to the feminine, reinforcing his status through association with the female deity.

Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck (2000: 160–64) also note the scarcity of images of female elites in the Late Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods (3500–2900 BCE). In contrast to the “man in the net skirt” at the top of the social hierarchy, ambiguous “pig-tailed” figures identified as mortal women, appear closer to the bottom. Mortal men and women were seldom depicted together, perhaps reflecting hierarchical relations between them that resulted in female exclusion or reduced prominence within society. Despite clear textual evidence in the Early Dynastic period for independent, high-status women, and the presence of female “kings” in early Mesopotamia, their existence in visual imagery is remarkably limited. The disk of Enheduanna is a rare Early Dynastic image of a living female in public office. The largely private role of women, in contrast to the more public role of men, explains such infrequent and restricted representation (Winter 1987: 201).

In the Early Dynastic III to Akkadian periods (ca. 2600–2200 BCE), women usually appear in ritual scenes, as static or auxiliary figures in a restricted range of activities (Pollock 1991: 382). By contrast, male images are active and “doing things”: as soldiers, musicians, and carriers of objects. Images of

women other than royalty were few. Early Dynastic cylinder seals from the Royal Cemetery of Ur (ca. 2600–2350 BCE) were distributed differentially across male- and female-gendered burial assemblages: contest scenes, usually depicting males, were “filled with movement and action,” and ordinarily found with typical male burial sets, whereas banquet scenes, in which female figures participate alongside men, were more common in female burials (Pollock 1991: 380–82). The banquet scene seldom occurred in bureaucratic or administrative settings, however, suggesting that seals for women were intended more for adornment than administration. Perhaps this difference reflected the gendered ideologies of the image-creators themselves, who were mostly men.

Recent studies of Early Dynastic statuary yield more nuanced perspectives on the role of women and men in public and religious life. The temple dedicated to the moon god Sin at Khafajah, for example, contained many more female than male statues (Pollock 1991: 382). At Nippur’s Inana Temple, female donor statues outnumbered male statues in places where they were found together. Elite women, priestesses, or female religious officials commonly gave offerings to the temple, including stone vessels bearing female names (Evans 2012: 195–99). Fewer female statues were inscribed, however, perhaps reflecting women’s more circumscribed status (Pollock 1991: 384).

The marginalization of the female image persisted in Mesopotamia for centuries, evident also in the sculptures that adorned the Neo-Assyrian palaces at Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh. Images of women seldom occur in the reliefs; when they do, they are “integrated into narratives of masculinity” (Bahrani 2001: 125): scenes of warfare, hunting, tribute, banquets, and ritual activities. Depictions of mortal women are limited to non-Assyrian (i.e., foreign) prisoners, musicians, and servants. The artist sought primarily to express humiliation and defeat: images of female (and male) captives reinforced the masculinity of the Assyrian soldiers. Much of the space within Assyrian palaces appears to be male-gendered and intended for male viewers, with rare images of elite Assyrian women (Svärd 2015: 74–80). Imagery of the Assyrian queen, or images of the scorpion are also attested at a smaller scale on seals: the latter may have served as an emblem of the queen and a symbol of the goddess Ishhara (Svärd 2015: 74–75). The scarcity of queenly portraits in Assyrian palaces, in contrast to dominant images of the armed king, may have been a means to protect women and symbolize their highly valued role in the palace (Gansell 2012). Exceptional is the banquet scene from Nineveh (Figure 8.3) depicting Assurbanipal reclining on a couch in a garden, with his wife Libbali-sharrat seated on a throne surrounded by female musicians and servants who raise their bowls in celebration (Bahrani 2001: 125; Ornan 2002). The scene may be rich with symbols and gestures that evoke fertility and eroticism (Gansell 2014: 393–98). Royal women may have played a more active role in ceremonial and political life in Assyria from the

reign of Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) onward, as a greater number of female representations and inscriptions suggests (Reade 1987). For example, a depiction of Queen Naqia as a central figure on a bronze relief exhibits similarities to the adjacent king in size, pose, and gesture. She carries a mirror as a feminine symbol, in contrast to the mace carried by the king (Svärd 2015: 77–79, fig. 3). Nevertheless, images of elite women remain scarce, indicating tight social and ideological controls in their creation. Moreover, several depict the foreign (Levantine) wives of Assyrian rulers, such as Libbali-sharrat and Naqia (Gansell 2014). Perhaps the court’s social norms permitted images of foreign wives precisely because of their non-Assyrian identity and origins.



Figure 8.3 Assurbanipal and Libbali-sharrat banqueting in a garden. Nineveh, North Palace (645–635 BCE). Gypsum; h. relief 58.42 cm. British Museum ME 124920.

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The situation in Assyria contrasts with the Iron Age Syro-Hittite regions to the northwest, where mortuary stelae depicted men and women together. Women appear independently in portraits of varying levels of quality, often with personal items displaying their gendered status: mirrors, ornaments, and spindles. Stefania Mazzoni (2003) terms this “having and showing,” indicating a greater freedom in female image-creation and possibly more competitive social environments between women and households. Women may have commissioned their own mortuary stelae, just as male elites did within their own lifetimes.

This survey reveals common themes over time. From the Uruk period onward, male elite images outnumber female elite images. Representing himself opposite a female deity helped the male ruler demonstrate his power and legitimacy. Although images of elite women occur in the Early Dynastic period on plaques, statuary, and seals, they are restricted to ceremonial or religious settings, chiefly banquets. Perhaps these were the main arenas in which women could express themselves publicly alongside men, with enhanced opportunities for representation and socio-political negotiation. By the second and first millennia, female exclusion from elite settings was

formalized, suggesting a higher degree of patriarchal control over women and the production of images of women. This is not to say that female images were excluded from everyday life. On a much smaller scale, terracottas and portable media such as seals were more accessible to non-elites within the private sphere, affording far fewer restrictions.

Nudity and Sex: Titillation, Fertility, Protection

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century interpretations of sacred prostitution in the ancient Near East, derived from classical sources, helped perpetuate an association between the image of the nude female and promiscuity and ritualized sex (Assante 2007; Bahrani 2001: 169–78). The equation of nudity with sexuality remains at the heart of today’s scholarly debates over the function and role of gendered images in the ancient Near East. Disentangling sexist attitudes from the long history of research on these images presents a major challenge for those seeking an “unbiased” view of the ancient Near Eastern “nude” (see also Cooper 2013). Understanding ancient Near Eastern attitudes toward nudity presents further challenges because most textual sources were written by and intended for elites, in contrast to images that were accessible to a wider section of the population. One literary source that sheds light on Sumerian attitudes toward nudity is the “Descent of Inana/Ishtar,” which describes the removal of her clothing and jewelry as she journeys to the Netherworld. Removal of these items from her body could symbolize the stripping of her power and the accoutrements of real life (Bahrani 2001: 157–58).

Studies of nudity in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt demonstrate its variable meanings in diverse contexts (Asher-Greve and Sweeney 2006; Assante 2006). In images of warfare or victory, nudity is far from sexual. Nudity can symbolize servitude, defeat, humiliation, or loss of power, for example in the Stele of the Vultures or in Neo-Assyrian reliefs showing defeated or dead naked enemies. In the Uruk period, elite males are also depicted naked, probably for reasons of religious piety or supernatural heroic masculinity (Bahrani 2001: 60).

Interpretations of female nude images could be positioned on a sliding scale, from eroticized to de-eroticized roles. Were they primarily intended for male sexual arousal or enjoyment (Bahrani 1996, 2001; Pinnock 1995)? Or did they serve a primarily apotropaic function, protecting individuals and households from perceived harm (Assante 2002, 2006)? Between these scalar opposites, “fertility” is a problematic and ambiguous term for interpreting the nude female image. It can include erotic meaning, yet it provides a safe (prudish) distance from more sexually explicit interpretations.

Frans Wiggermann's (2010) summary of Mesopotamian texts and images related to sexuality includes nude figures and copulating couples on terracottas, seals, and lead plaques. A small number of Early Dynastic seals also depict one or more divine figures engaged in what may be "ritual sex" (Cooper 2013: 51–54, fig. 1). Old Babylonian terracotta plaques furnish an abundant source of sexual images (Figure 8.4). Since these figures lack divine symbols, they may represent mortal conjugal couples. Yet Julia Assante (2002: 36–42, figs. 4–7) considers the conjugal couples to represent Inana and Dumuzi engaged in an act of "sacred marriage." Another often-cited plaque type shows a standing male and female couple having intercourse *a tergo*, while the woman bends over and drinks beer through a straw. This image has been associated with prostitution, connected in turn with beer-drinking and taverns (Bahrani 2001: 51–52, pl. 3).



Figure 8.4 Model bed depicting conjugal couple. Attributed to Bismaya mound IV; Isin-Larsa/Old Babylonian period, ca. 2000–1600 BCE. Ceramic; 7.3 × 5.2 × 2.2 cm. Oriental Institute Museum OIM A361.

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Erotic plaques have also been studied in conjunction with Babylonian love and sex poetry (Assante [2002](#): 39; Leick [2003](#)), contributing to the notion that they were used to assist and encourage sexual desire and boost fertility and sexual reproduction. Some texts mention images formed from dough used magically to aid procreation and fertility (Biggs [2002](#)). Although these objects

do not survive archaeologically, they may provide indirect evidence for one function of the terracotta plaques. Given the use of molds and mass-production of plaques, probably in potters' workshops, and an apparent decline in handmade (i.e., "homemade") figurines from the late third millennium onward (Moorey 2003: 25–28), ritual meaning may have been differentially bestowed on different types of images produced in different settings—that is, those made at home compared with those acquired as the products of craft specialists.

The presumption that the potters who created such images were primarily male is based on limited textual sources from the Ur III period for craft personnel. Although the gendered production of anthropomorphic images is not specifically mentioned, there are early references to female deities who worked with clay and created human images, and who were apparently later replaced by male clay-working deities (Graff 2014: 379). The Babylonian Atrahasis epic refers to the creator goddess Mami, who is assisted by birthing goddesses in forming (molding) and incubating ("baking") clay images of the first human males and females, although this story provides no evidence for the gender of the terracottas' producers. The question of who produced the images must remain open, although Sarah Graff (2014: 379) suggests that men probably produced the plaques either for their own erotic enjoyment, or as fertility talismans for women.

Other scholars have discussed the terracottas' likely role in household magic in evoking Ishtar/Inana's powers, or in defending the family against evil forces. In this sense, sexual intercourse, and images of intercourse, helped to deflect demons and malevolent spirits. The terracottas' contexts reaffirm their domestic, non-elite usage. Explicit sexual images were found in high-traffic domestic spaces accessible by men, women, and children (Assante 2002: 28). The images may have protected liminal spaces, such as doorways, which separated the non-physical world from everyday reality. Findspot resolution in archaeological reports from early twentieth-century excavations is often lacking, however, contributing to the decontextualized approach to such images.

The lead plaques from Assur from the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE), which depict one or two men engaged in intercourse with a woman, represent an entirely different image genre. Their excavator, Walter Andrae, mistakenly published the finds as coming from the Ishtar Temple and connected them with an erotic-orgiastic cult of the goddess (Bahrani 2001: 52–53). Assante (2007) interprets the plaques instead as pornographic furniture inlays depicting clothed, western male captives engaged in live sex performances for Assyrian elites (see also Cooper 2013). If correctly interpreted, the plaques served the dual purpose of male sexual arousal *and* humiliation and subordination of conquered foreigners. This function would have reinforced an Assyrian masculinist narrative of control and order in an

imperial, but nevertheless private, setting.

Bahrani (1996: 7–8) views Mesopotamian nude female images and sex images as primarily objects of male desire, intended to attract the male gaze and arouse the viewer sexually: a seductive “pinup.” Important evidence for this theory is the life-sized marble statue of a youthful female found at Nineveh, dating from the reign of Assur-bel-kala (ca. 1074–1056 BCE). Its inscription states, “I made these sculptures in the provinces, cities and garrisons for titillation” (see also Wiggermann 2010: 422–23). The statue and text imply an important but rarely attested role for male perceptions of women’s bodies in public settings. For Bahrani (2001: 90), the statue’s frontal stance suggests that other frontal nude images—of smaller dimensions, often portable—were likewise intended for male sexual arousal. Did such statues help to increase libido or morale among men who were far from home? Perhaps they served as a medium of communication between elites and commoners within a patriarchal and male-dominated society. The Assyrian king may have fostered prevalent male attitudes toward an idealized female body as a gesture of his patriarchal benevolence between the state and (male) citizens.

The *nackte Frau* designates a specific image type: a young, nude female with clasped hands, shown frontally, but lacking definitive symbols of divine status. Beginning in the Late Uruk period she appears as a young slender female with small breasts; genitalia rendered as a pubic triangle with hair; loose or plaited shoulder-length hair; often wearing jewelry (Pinnock 1995). Many have viewed her as an evocation of the goddess (Ishtar or another) or as a servant of the temple, connecting her nudity with a presumed fertility function (Petty 2006: 38–39). The icon may, however, be equated with the Akkadian word *baštu*, which has been tied to female dignity within the household and commonly associated with a good life (Assante 2006: 201). The word is feminine and represents a protective spirit, like the *lamassu*. Perhaps these images were more important for household protection than for fertility or sexual arousal. Personality (soul), private life, good luck, prosperity, and sexual emotions are some of the potential meanings associated with the figure (Wiggermann 1998: 52–53).

In the Levant, the youthful figure commonly known as Astarte is interpreted as a protective goddess of the family who played an important role in female piety and was probably an “identification figure for women” (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 108). Some women may have identified with the goddess at different life-stages: at puberty, before conception, during pregnancy, and after childbirth. Perhaps idealized depictions of the youthful nude figures, ornamented with anklets, bracelets, necklaces, and hairstyles, reinforced a familiarity between the figure and adolescent females and young mothers (Green 2007: 298–300).

In her study of Bronze Age anthropomorphic figurines from Umm el-Marra,

Syria, Alice Petty (2006: 36–42) tackles the issue of identifying the frontal female nude, examining previous assessments of her role as a “fertility” symbol or goddess. She observes that during the Late Bronze Age the image was standardized through the use of molds, and concludes that the frontal nude became an icon during this period. It is unclear whether the figure’s ambiguous identity contributed to her iconicity, or whether there was a shared understanding of her identity or meaning. Ambiguity was probably a strength, allowing interpretation and recognition by different people in the community without resorting to divine symbols or inscriptions. Yet context is crucial, as a study of ritually deposited nude female plaques from second-millennium Syria demonstrates. At Ebla they were found in pits with broken pottery and interpreted as remains of periodic communal ritual feasts rather than as personal offerings to a temple. At Tell Munbaqa, plaques were found near niches accessible in the main areas of houses that also contained incense burners and house models, suggesting an association with household rituals (Pruss 2002: 541). Similar terracotta plaques recovered from potters’ workshops at Tell Bazi suggest production outside the home, but for domestic use. Such figures were widely accessible and played an important role in household and communal rituals, contrasting with highly valued metal figures of predominantly male figures and animals found in Levantine shrines and temples (Moorey and Fleming 1984).

Another highly standardized and uninscribed female image is the Judean Pillar Figurine (JPF) of the southern Levant, excavated from tombs and houses of the eighth to sixth centuries BCE (Darby 2014) (Figure 8.5). Its distribution was largely restricted to the central and southern highlands, with variants in Syria and Cyprus. A pillar-like base resembles a long garment covering the body, enabling the figurine to stand upright. Many have a separately molded head with detailed facial features, hairstyles, and ornaments. No divine symbols or props are present, although some scholars associate the pillared form with the biblical description of the *asherah* as a tree or tree-like image (Hadley 2000: 83). JPFs are often studied in isolation, apart from their contemporary counterparts, the horse and male-rider figurines (Kletter 2001; Moorey 2003: 48). The large breasts of the JPF have commonly suggested a fertility function: the breasts are shown as if engorged with milk, which, combined with the lack of visible pregnancy, may indicate an emphasis on breastfeeding and childrearing (Hadley 2000: 196). Because the figures seem to be clothed, or at least present ambiguity regarding nudity, the JPF is generally not interpreted in erotic terms (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 329–31, §193).



Figure 8.5 Figurine of nude female (“Judean Pillar Figurine”). Tell ed-Duweir (ancient Lachish); eighth–seventh century BCE. Ceramic; h. 18.1 cm. Gift of Harris D. and H. Dunscombe Colt, 1934. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 34.126.53.

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Discussions of the JPF’s identity strikingly resemble attempts to identify the frontal Syro-Mesopotamian nude female (i.e., the *nackte Frau*) described earlier. Many scholars associate her with Asherah, the wife of El in the Late

Bronze Age Canaanite pantheon and consort of the Israelite god Yahweh in the Iron Age. Others suggest she was a nursing goddess, a generic mother- or fertility goddess, or a mortal worshiper, suppliant, even a deceased ancestor. Ziony Zevit (2001: 274) suggests two broad possibilities: a pregnant or lactating female deity, worshiped by men and women, or a low-level feminine intercessor who conveyed petitions to higher powers. Raz Kletter (2001) rejects a fertility interpretation in part because the figures lack female pudenda: a somewhat reductionist viewpoint focusing on a single body part rather than the whole image. He proposes instead that the figure magically and symbolically represented “plenty,” implying a broader role for the household, family, or community. Erin Darby (2014: 334–36) suggests that long-standing and widespread ritual practices in the Levant and Egypt associated with females, healing, breasts (mothers’ milk), and protection formed the backdrop for the JPFs. The role of the figures in healing and protection, particularly within household settings, does not preclude their potential association with a deity or divine intercessor.

Although facial features, hair, and jewelry vary, the JPFs are fairly standardized and deny individuality in a way similar to the Syro-Mesopotamian nude icons discussed above. A key difference is the JPF’s overt reference to the female body without emphasizing nudity. An apparent shift toward images of clothed females, or a tendency to avoid overt nudity, could represent a deliberate de-eroticizing of female images (Engle 1979: 114). Covering up is also evident in Assyria during the same period. On an eighth-century gold crown from Tomb III at Nimrud, a series of female winged figures wear a long garment that covers the body, yet reveals the female form underneath (Gansell 2008: 116). Levantine ivories and Neo-Assyrian textual sources suggest that idealized feminine beauty was not always associated with nudity and sexuality. Artists of this period seem to have consistently combined a voluptuous body, personal adornment including elaborate costume, thick and dark coiffed hair, and cosmetically enhanced features that emphasize the fullness of the face, and large dark eyes (Gansell 2014).

In summary, sexualized interpretations have been somewhat uncritically imposed on images of ancient Near Eastern nude females, often as a result of Western biases and perceptions that equate nudity with sex. Although images of sexual intercourse are well attested, they are less common in the visual repertoire and tend to be more frequent in the Early Dynastic and Old Babylonian periods. Nude female images of the second and first millennia have generated a wide range of identifications and interpretations, in part underscoring the fruitlessness of attempting to decipher “her” identity. Little is known about how such images were used or by whom, their meanings, or their attributes. They could have meant different things to children, men, or women; at events such as religious festivals; or during the life-stages of birth,

puberty, marriage, and death.

Gender Ambiguity and Intersexuality

Until the 1990s, scholars studying ancient Near Eastern art displayed ambivalent attitudes toward human images depicting multiple or composite genders. They tended to single out such images as rare curiosities or overlook them because of their ambiguity. This approach may result from a modern Western tendency to classify sex and gender in binary male-female terms (McCaffrey 2002), and a limited set of explanatory or methodological frameworks for dealing with such images. Those images that have been studied have been fetishized and identified as hermaphrodites, transvestites, and prostitutes. Only recently have anthropology and sociology embraced intersexuality and third genders, following Michel Foucault (1980) and Marilyn Strathern (1988), who have demonstrated the fluidity of gender perceptions, changes in gender over the human lifecycle, and the potential for multiple genders within individuals.

Studies of ancient Near Eastern art have sometimes employed the term “third gender” with differing meanings. Susan Pollock and Reinhard Bernbeck (2000) include ambiguously gendered figures on seal imagery in their “third gender” category; Julia Asher-Greve (2002) views intersex individuals as belonging to the “third gender”; Kathleen McCaffrey (2002) refers to third and fourth genders. A wide range of non-binary gender categories thus risks becoming lumped into a single category. It may be safer to refer to “third genders” or “composite genders” to acknowledge the varied, culturally constructed interpretations of biological sex and gender that fall outside the normative male-female opposition (see also Croucher 2012: 173–77). The notion of a gender spectrum or a biological-sex continuum has been proposed as an alternative to the binary male-female opposition.

Ambiguous images combine male and female features or elements of masculinity or femininity that challenge binary oppositions. A Neolithic figurine from Tepe Sarab, Iran, for example, can be viewed as a female image with exaggerated breasts and an elongated head, but from another angle as a phallus; other Neolithic phallomorphic images exist, as do incised stones that some identify as vulvas (Croucher 2012: 193–94). These examples suggest that gendered dualism can coexist within a single object as an intentional aspect of production and perception. Indeed, this dualism may have been part of its ritual or symbolic power.

Citing the female-bodied statue of the male-named Ur-Nanshe, a singer from late third-millennium Mari, Kathleen McCaffrey (2002) suggests that in early

Mesopotamia male and female difference was culturally (rather than biologically) constructed. Other examples that challenge normative male and female categories include “male” bearded figures wearing “female” dress from Early Dynastic Khafajah and Iron Age Hasanlu, and images of bearded queens in Egypt and perhaps Mesopotamia. McCaffrey proposes four gender categories: normative male with male sex and gender; normative female with female sex and gender; variant male with male sex and female gender; and variant female with female sex and male gender. The “third gender” is more frequent than the fourth because of the latter’s diminished visibility: Ur-Nanshe’s sculpture is simply one of the more prominent examples of gender variance. This case highlights the extent to which ancient attitudes to sex and gender often remain hidden or obscured. That few studies of gender variance would have been made without the evidence of visual images highlights the need to make the vast visual corpus more readily available (Reade 2002: 554, fig. 3).

For Mesopotamia, textual sources offer some insights into gendered dualism and asymmetry. Inana/Ishtar, a deity of sex and war, has been discussed in relation to male and female duality, especially her ability to transform between male and female, which Bahrani (2001: 143–48) describes as “alterity.” This ability suggests that she was androgynous, bisexual, or a hermaphrodite. But her power lies in her ability to transform her own sexuality (and those of others), and to represent the duality of the sexes within one individual.

Ishtar’s sexuality has generally been emphasized over her warlike aspect (Assante 2009: 31–33). She combines elements of femininity and masculinity, and is presented as sexually potent despite her inability to conceive or give birth. Visual representations were typically feminine and frontal, with female-gendered dress or jewelry. In Early Dynastic and Akkadian seals and wall paintings she is a warrior carrying a weapon and a quiver (Figure 8.6). In this guise, she is presented in the same image both in profile and frontally, in an active “process of turning” (Bahrani 2001: 131). The frontal view exposes her breasts and symbolizes her femininity, while her lower body exposes a raised leg with foot resting on an attribute animal—a pose associated with male deities. “Ishtar has the ability to destroy civilized man by means of violence,” observes Bahrani (2001: 159–60), “as well as the power to destroy masculinity by turning men into women and beasts ... effectively a destruction of the cultural order.” The ability to transform between male and female, or to represent sexual duality, was dangerous and powerful.



Figure 8.6 Cylinder seal with modern impression: Ishtar with foot on back of lion, with minor goddess; inscribed “To the Goddess Nin-ishkin, Ilaknuid the seal-cutter presented (this seal).” Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2200 BCE). Limestone; h. 0.42 cm. Oriental Institute Museum OIM A27903.

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Texts tend to be more informative than preserved images on multiple or composite identity. In a Sumerian hymn of Iddin-Dagan, the male cult personnel of Inana (**sag-ur-sag**) walk before the goddess in the New Year’s Festival bringing spears and weapons, dressed as men on their right sides and as women on their left sides: a literal example of gendered asymmetry that is not visually preserved (Assante 2009: 35). A plaque figurine dated to the Iron II from Tel ‘Ira, Israel (Figure 8.7), has been interpreted both as a hermaphrodite and a cross-dressing male (Beck 1999: 387). The frontal figure holds a small drum over the upper torso, obscuring any clear sign of breasts. A beard was applied over the jawline in a layer of clay, and between its legs appears to be a phallus. It has been identified as a hermaphrodite because of the combination of male and female features; despite the lack of clearly indicated breasts, the drum is typically associated with females. Yet Burgh (2006: 87) asks how clothed female dancers and men dressed as women could in fact be distinguished. The Tel ‘Ira figurine could represent a cross-dressing male or an intersex individual. Both were prohibited according to the Hebrew Bible, but the existence of such images suggests that they were tolerated and even celebrated within the realms of music and entertainment.

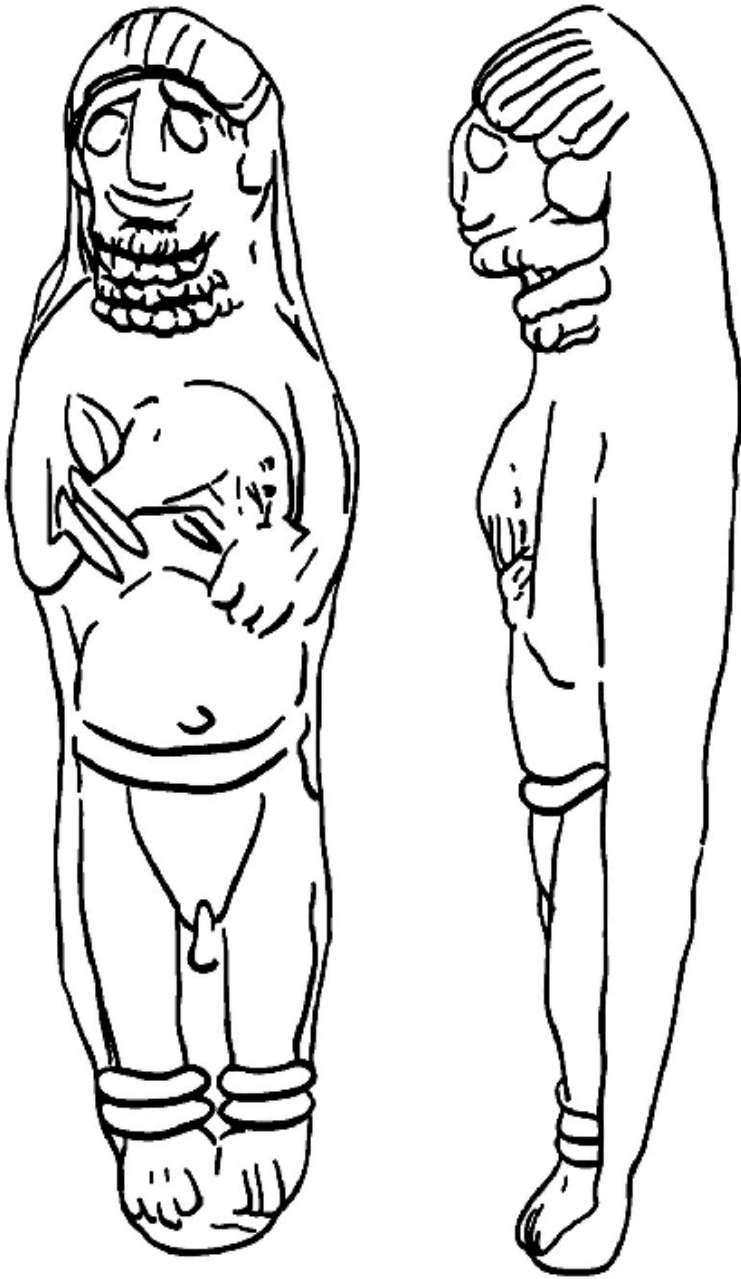


Figure 8.7 Figure identified as a hermaphrodite or cross-dressing male. Tel 'Ira; eighth–seventh century BCE. Ceramic; 13 × 4 cm.

From P. Beck, “Human Figure with Tambourine,” *Tel 'Ira: A Stronghold in the Biblical Negev*, ed. I. Beit-Arieh (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, 1999), 386, fig. 7.5.
Reproduced with permission of the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.

Images of eunuchs as court officials and attendants in Neo-Assyrian art must be viewed in a somewhat different way. Their beardless and somewhat fleshy or overweight appearance is consistent with medical descriptions of castrated males. They have long been identified as individuals loyal to the king, who could interact with women of the palace without fear of sexual indiscretion. Eunuchs are shown wearing the clothing, hairstyles, and ornaments of Assyrian male courtiers, thus as normative males; yet they lack a beard, an important symbol of male power and virility, maturity, and manhood. They could have worn a false beard, but did not. Beardlessness signified their unique status and symbolized loyalty to the king. The portrayal of eunuchs either as ritual attendants or royal fan-bearers, helped to frame, define, and therefore protect the space around the king (Collins 2010). This perspective could indicate that eunuchs were perceived in a semi-divine way, symbolically protecting the king just as genies protected such spaces, and appreciated in part as otherworldly or supernatural.

These examples encapsulate the considerable challenges in identifying and attributing “composite gender” perspectives within Near Eastern art. The limited number of images indicates scarcity, in part related to the small number of elites (such as Ur-Nanshe) at one end of the scale and prohibitions or taboos at the other. Ishtar’s prominent image as a deity with male and female characteristics suggests how intersex or multigendered individuals may have been perceived: simultaneously powerful and dangerous, and limited to specific roles in society.

Conclusions

Largely because of the prevalence of female figurines from many regions and periods, including the Near East, the Mother Goddess paradigm of the past century has dominated the study of gender in relation to prehistoric religion and daily life, and has undergone profound transformations in recent decades. New discoveries at Göbekli Tepe and reassessments of earlier studies of figurines have contributed to a near-reversal of the paradigm, suggesting that patriarchal roots were well established in prehistory—although images alone provide insufficient evidence to demonstrate this proposition. Studied alongside female images, the earliest images of male rulers in Mesopotamia indicate that even for elite women representations and roles were often restricted, perhaps due in part to a public-private distinction between the lives of men and women respectively. The artisans who created the visual images, and the elites who commissioned them, worked within carefully controlled traditions that permitted certain image categories but excluded others.

The terracotta plaque or figurine was accessible to most, if not all, sectors of society, and reveals the most variability in scholarly interpretation. Simplistic

“fertility” explanations are inadequate; we need a more complex, multilayered set of meanings. The ambiguity of iconic, standardized nude female images may be a key to understanding their popularity and persistence. Such images are multivalent: to a female child or adolescent, an aspirational symbol of ideal young womanhood; to the household matriarch, a symbol of dignity and household protection; to men, perhaps an object of desire.

To some extent, images have played a remarkably passive role in interpretations of gender and sexuality, often appearing as illustrations to accompany ancient texts. For the “sacred marriage,” gendered images have taken on lives of their own, integrating textual biases. Yet texts also crucially provide a range of possibilities for interpreting images and reconstructing socio-cultural attitudes.

As gender studies move into a post-feminist era, will the way that scholars approach gendered images change accordingly? Additional work could investigate human imagery to explore gender dynamics in the past. One answer to the challenge of interpreting gender is to approach maleness and femaleness as a spectrum or continuum, along with duality, alterity, and asymmetry. Archaeological context is probably the most important element in furnishing much-needed resolution concerning the spatial significance of gendered art. Recent studies have succeeded in reintegrating information about the archaeological contexts of gendered images, contributing new meaning and additional clues to the function and active role of images in ritual settings.

Gendered images are not a passive reflection of past social attitudes, but instead likely played an active role in the social reproduction of gendered ideals and attitudes. A promising avenue lies in investigating changes in images and their contexts across time and major chronological transitions, to determine their impact on different sectors of society.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

This chapter’s introduction provides a survey of the literature, with bibliographical references; see especially the contributions by Asher-Greve, Assante, Bahrani, Gansell, Pollock, and Winter. Useful collections of articles devoted to gender and sexuality in the ancient Near Eastern sphere include Bolger 2008, Durand 1987, Parpola and Whiting 2002, and Schroer 2006.

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NOTES

1 For discussions, see Meskell 1995; Moorey 2003: 5–6; Russell 1998; Roller 1999: 8–24; Graff 2014: 376–78.

2 Debates continue regarding the extent to which these rituals were physically performed, whether the male and female figures were mortal substitutes for

deities, and whether the Uruk Vase scene depicts deities engaged in a mythical or metaphorical act. See Bahrani [2001](#): 134–40; [2002](#): 18, 20; Cooper [1993](#): 84–87; Pollock and Bernbeck [2000](#): 157–59; Steinkeller [1999](#). But see also Assante [2009](#).

CHAPTER NINE

Semiotics, Reception Theory, and Poststructuralism

Marlies Heinz

Introduction

Archaeology is a discipline that gains its findings about past societies, thus about human thought and action, primarily from their material legacies. An emphasis on materiality underscores the significance and agency of the material world. Whether naturally occurring or human-made objects, materiality was in the past—as in the present—also a medium of nonverbal communication. This chapter considers issues in studying nonverbal communication, with the aim of identifying potentially fruitful approaches to interpreting the ancient Near Eastern material record.

When dealing with communication, the challenges that generally arise involve exploring the operation of communication systems; determining contexts and interrelations of actions; defining senders and recipients of messages as well as the contexts of production and reception; dealing with characters, signs and codes used in past societies and cultures; and decoding messages delivered via materiality. Investigations also address what capabilities the recipients need in order to understand messages inherent in material culture, and how those recipients meet the various challenges—those facing both past actors and present-day scholars. A further complex of questions explores how material culture gains meanings in societies, and what role the contexts of communication play in allowing or preventing successful nonverbal (and verbal) understanding.

The challenges posed with respect to the ancient Near East are shared with studies of all past societies. In every archaeological context, we lack the two most relevant factors needed to reconstruct communication: the sender and the receiver of the messages, that is, precisely those protagonists to ask what the intended message was, and whether and how it was understood. While this gap cannot be filled, it can be bridged. The social and cultural sciences, which share cognitive interests with archaeology yet possess a broader spectrum of sources, and hence more subtle methods for dealing with communication in general and nonverbal communication in particular, furnish this opportunity. Specialists in these fields are able to consult the protagonists directly, create empirically acquired knowledge, and explore and *understand* how and why

communication (including nonverbal communication) functions. Along with philosophy, social and cultural sciences address the deduction of fundamental aspects of communication, developing theoretical approaches that *explain* how and why communication and nonverbal communication function. The results of their research should assist students of antiquity in formulating subject-specific approaches to explain the processes of communication represented by the materiality of every archaeological context.

Developments in semiotics, reception theory, the production of culture perspective, and the approaches often grouped as poststructuralist offer the most promising studies for our particular purposes. Semiotics deals with verbal and nonverbal communication, attempting to explain the basics of communication as such. Reception theory concentrates mainly on the reader's or viewer's role and function in nonverbal communication. Since understanding a message through material means obviously requires discussion of the role of this materiality along with the sender and producers, I briefly discuss the production of culture approach. The role and function of contexts for human action and mutual understanding has already been stressed. The umbrella term *poststructuralism* embraces epistemological reflections on contexts and the different roles of various participants in the processes of "decoding" and explaining the world. While these theoretical perspectives have had a clear impact on the study of Greek and Roman art (Hölscher 2015; Squire 2015; Trimble 2015), their application to the ancient Near East has as yet been limited.

Nonverbal Communication and How It Functions

Nonverbal communication works and functions via exchange of characters and signals. The most relevant factors are the sender, the sender's context and aims, the material culture and its message, the receiver, and the context in which the nonverbal communication takes place (Hahn 2005: 115–29; Tomasello 1999, 2008; Eco 1976). To participate knowledgeably in this communication, both sender and receiver should possess a common repertoire of cultural knowledge and codes, as is usually the case when sender and receiver have been socialized in the same context. Context—the context in which the participants originate, and the context in which nonverbal communication takes or took place—thus plays a significant role in successful communication. If sender and receiver come from the same social and cultural context or habitat, nonverbal communication should mostly function without major problems, apart from the general potential for misunderstanding inherent in every form of communication—verbal, gestural, or nonverbal via material. The possibility or danger of idiosyncratic or even complete misunderstandings potentially increases, however, if sender and receiver

possess divergent repertoires of signals and codes, as might occur when they originate in different social or cultural contexts or have undergone different forms of socialization within the same community or in different social contexts. Where sender and receiver try to communicate nonverbally beyond appropriate boundaries, social or cultural, synchronically or diachronically, the risk of misunderstanding increases accordingly. In nonverbal communication, the medium that carries the message is not necessarily a person communicating via body language (gestures, mimicry), but material artifacts.

Communication can therefore take place without the sender's spatial or temporal presence. This separation of sending and receiving a message implies that once the object has left the sender's control, he or she can no longer determine who will receive the message. The possibility of producing and sending a message separate in time and space from obtaining and decoding it increases even further the risk of misunderstanding. While the aims and intentions of the producer or sender of a message are encoded within its material expression—that is, the meanings of the message are set at the time of composition—the connotations potentially change with every change of participants and contexts, whether the changes are determined synchronically or diachronically, socially or culturally. In his pioneering study *Critical Theory*, Max Horkheimer ([1937] 2011) underlined the relevance of human imagination as well as the contexts (and thus also changing contexts) of perception, and the standpoint and life experience for human perception of the world and thus its ways of communicating. The success of nonverbal communication thus crucially depends on the compatibility of various factors. The cultural knowledge of sender and recipient is decisive in determining whether the latter will be able to decode the materialized message in the sense the former intended. Other factors also play a vital role: the context of message production and the context in which nonverbal communication takes place; the practice in dealing with the materiality as medium of a message; and current discourses.

Of the many factors involved in nonverbal communication, archaeological research has available only two concrete components: the materiality that constitutes the excavated context in toto, and the single elements that together comprise this excavated context. These two components of the whole serve archaeologists in reconstructing all other parts and elements involved in the complex process of nonverbal communication: identifying the producer of the object and the sender and the receiver of the message; exploring how the communication system operates; developing solutions for decoding the messages inherent in the object; and capturing the intentions, processes, and success or failure of the intended communication. In short: archaeological research has to link the etic standpoint of the archaeologist with the emic view of the world by past actors.

Roles and Functions of Contexts and Materiality in Nonverbal Communication

The role and importance of contexts for nonverbal communication according to my “traditional” hermeneutic view have been illustrated above. Some further reflections exemplify “context” as a culturally and socially influential factor in human action: contexts and human action are interwoven by interaction. People create, shape, and change their environment. At the same time, this “human-made” environment, like the natural environment, has an impact on the world’s perception of its creators and users. The thought, behavior, and actions of people in time and space and in their social environments is shaped by, and simultaneously also a reaction to, their respective habitats. Contexts thus also affect processes of nonverbal communication, and archaeological research consequently devotes considerable attention to a detailed analysis of context. Knowing the context in which the producer creates a message and the context in which the reception takes place means gaining insights into significant factors of the framing conditions in which the nonverbal communication originated and took place. The sender’s habitat influences the intentions, needs, and possibilities of producing a message, the addressing of a certain target group, and the contents of the message. The receiver’s habitat, on the other hand, plays a crucial role in the successful outcome of decoding and understanding the message in the sender’s intended sense and for the range of connotations that arise in the recipient’s mind and thus are part of and involved in the understanding. To capture context is thus also to capture aspects of the current discourses and state of knowledge of the involved parties. Analyzing nonverbal communication thus first requires insights into how materiality works in general as a medium of a message. Decoding nonverbally transmitted messages then calls for knowledge of how to “read” the codes, the “materialized language” used by sender and recipient.

The Archaeologically “Produced Context”

Context and materiality, excavated by the archaeologists, are thus the specific key factors at hand when we reconstruct the factors and processes of—as well as the parties involved in—nonverbal communication, and context is in many ways one of the most telling factors. Several peculiarities of the archaeologically “produced context” are significant in reconstructing nonverbal communication.

An archaeological context presents a static moment *x* in time and space, which is the result and at the same time a preliminary endpoint of a dynamic

process *y* in time and space. Taking this into account yields the recognition that this “cut-out of time” that archaeologists capture with their excavations does not necessarily say anything about the time span that has elapsed between the creation of the materiality, its active use and function as the medium of a message, and the moment when it “became an archaeological record.” The excavated materiality in toto may contain elements that were originally intended for and used in quite different action contexts. This situation, the drifting apart from original, primary and secondary contexts in which the materiality occurred, affected communication in antiquity and also affects today’s reconstruction. A few examples illustrate possible constellations that may occur and exhibit the discrepancies mentioned earlier between the context of the objects’ origin and the contexts of their use. Cross-cultural contacts—trade, exchange of goods, booty, or the possessions of emigrants who take their property with them—transfer objects to a cultural context different from the one in which they originated. Even when the previous owners and the new users are contemporaries, what do new owners know about the original functions, meanings, and messages of their acquired goods? Moreover, the archaeological record might present an even more complicated situation, in which the goods that were transferred from one cultural context to the other were already “antique” when exchanged. The separation between origin and use of the objects would then not only be cultural and spatial, but also temporal.

Over and over again, objects are used in contexts in which users and producers had nothing in common, where neither belongs to the same culture or social habitat—a situation comparable to that of the modern researcher—and where the users thus possibly lack the storehouse of characters, signals, and codes required to decode the message as intended. If so, another aspect becomes interesting. Was this knowledge in any way needed to make use of the object in a context entirely different from its original one?

The archaeologically “produced context” can be characterized not only as a cut-out in time, but also as a cut-out of an overall context that can never be captured in its entirety. “Imperfection” of evidence is a constant in archaeological research, which influences both the archaeologists’ view of history in general and research on nonverbal communication that took place in the past. A confident statement about whether the excavated record represents a context of human action in full is never possible. We should in any case ask whether there even exists anything like a “complete context” of human action. Archaeologists can say with certainty, however, that an archaeological record can never be described as either “complete” or “incomplete.” They can never be sure whether the findings they excavate contain all the constituent elements of a context at the time of its formation and use, at the time the medium of nonverbal communication was produced, or when the nonverbal communication took place. In other words, archaeologists cannot assess the

range of elements that may be missing in the excavated record; they can never with certainty determine the possible difference between excavated findings and a former “complete context.” Imperfection is the regular state of archaeological data. This issue has to be considered as a potential source of error when dealing with the past and when considering contexts as a meaningful source for reconstructing human action: in our case, nonverbal communication.

The Context and Standpoint of the Archaeologist as Researcher

Archaeologists explore the functioning of nonverbal communication *in the past* out of a situation of nonverbal communication *with the past*. “Reading and decoding” the functions, means, and nonverbally transmitted messages of past materiality results from nonverbal communication between archaeologists and the materiality and contexts they excavate. The cognitive interests, experience, methods and theories employed, the education, socialization, habitus and habitat, in short the scholars’ level of knowledge and creativity— thus, their present standpoint—influences their insights into, and their reconstructions and explanations of the processes of nonverbal communication of the past. As noted earlier: context matters. What does the archaeologist thus “really” see and recognize—the emic point of view? Thus analyzing materiality as medium of nonverbal communication, the messages denoted, exchanged, received, and connoted in the past, as contemporaneous actors saw it? Or the etic point of view—“how each investigator saw it”? Thus the archaeologists’ view of the past, their recognition, thoughts, and reflections on how past actors dealt with materiality as medium of nonverbal communication, their view on how the ancient participants denoted and exchanged, received, and connoted messages in the past? Context matters. When archaeologists interpret the past and reconstruct nonverbal communication on the basis of an invariably incomplete material record of this past, who is speaking?

Semiotics: The World of Signs

Very generally defined, semiotics is the study of signs. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) are acknowledged as the founders of what today comprises this wide-ranging field (Krois 2004; Pape 2004; Jäger 2007). Three additional names should be mentioned. The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) contributed to the theory of symbols with his idea

that humans create their world through the process of perception, and that all perception as such is always symbolic (Cassirer 1923–29; Paetzold 1993). The French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) is especially known for his work on the symbols and myths of everyday life (Barthes 1967; Röttger-Denker 2004), while the Italian literary theorist Umberto Eco (1976) is perhaps currently the best-known scholar in the field of semiotics.

Saussure carried out extensive language studies and analyzed language and the system of communication from the perspective that the relation between words and the “something” they designate is an arbitrary construction, a matter of convention within societies and cultures (Saussure 1916; Jäger 2007; Berger 2014: 50). According to Saussure, language should be described as a system of signs, and these signs as expressions of notions (Berger 2014: 48–49). This means that the relation between a word and the “something” the word names is a construction. The recipient of the word that is spoken by the “producer”/speaker with a specific meaning must be able to imagine the “something,” thus the meaning, connected to the word, in order to understand and be able to follow the intended communication and exchange of ideas. Saussure differentiated between two parts constituting the system of language, the “sound-image” and the “concept” (Berger 2014: 49). The sound-image or “signifier” is the word (for example: chair); the concept or “signified” is the mental image/imagination when hearing the word (that is, the object) “chair”: form, size, color, and material stand before the listener’s inner eye. Saussure thus developed a two-part model of a relation between word and imagination (the “something”). The exciting, innovative aspect of the model was his assertion that this relationship was only a matter of convention (Berger 2014: 50). The system underlying languages is valid for all languages, independent of time, space, and culture. The meaning of the signifier, the word, the term that evokes the image and names the signified (the thing, object), the “concept of imagination,” however, can and actually does change over time and according to the contexts in which it is used. The meaning of the signifier is not inherent. Its meaning is obtained, on the one hand, by the fact that every signifier is characterized as being different from another one: only this difference makes meaning at all possible and rational. On the other hand, the community using the language in question creates the specific context of meaning for every signifier. Language can be learned and the relationships between signifier and signified reduced to an intelligible variety. Words are arranged in a certain order by grammar. Grammar structures messages. It ensures that “a row of words” makes sense: it constitutes the base and frame of a message and thus makes the meaning of the message understandable.

Although most archaeological contexts lack the evidence of ancient texts, Saussure’s ideas nevertheless provide archaeologists with fundamental insights into contemplation of the material evidence excavated. Saussure laid the groundwork in thinking about the connection between naming and

meaning, the “concept of imagination,” and recognized that this connection potentially changes when the contexts of reception change. This cognizance should be the starting-point of all archaeological research: to reflect on what and whose are the meanings of the words we use to denote the materiality of the past with which we are dealing. Which, and whose denotations and connotations are transmitted by the archaeologist’s choice of words when she or he interprets the material evidence of a far distant past? Who is speaking when archaeologists speak (and write): the producer and user of the past, or the archaeologist of the present? *Contexts matter*—the context of the communicative acts of the past and the context of the archaeologists investigating today.

The Semiotic Approach to Materiality

To decode and understand messages sent on the basis of materiality presents a challenge different from that of dealing with texts, however. No grammar places materiality—things that surround people, the objects that people deal with—in a general and prescriptive order comparable to that of the grammar of a language. The formation of things in a context and their ensuing functions and meanings do not per se follow standardized rules. Certainly every society and culture has at hand rules that determine how certain things have to be arranged in specific situations in order to use them—for example, how to set the table. By knowing the habits one can correctly use tableware. But even without knowing the habits (the table manners, the grammar), the meaning of the order of things or the rules about how to use them, it is possible to sit down at a table, use the “things,” and eat. As Hans Peter Hahn (2005) demonstrates in his study of material culture, it is thus to a great extent practice that determines the way materiality is used and how (and what) meanings are assigned to it. The order of things is not the order of a grammar, and for this reason material culture is not to be read like a text. While the grammar is fixed (at a certain moment of use), practice is contextual (at a certain moment of its performance). The semiotic approach to things—the endeavor to understand characters and signs as means of communication—must therefore be different.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–58) pursued the problem of how nonverbal communication, communication on the basis of materiality and gestures, functions. He saw a need for a more detailed differentiation of signs and their meanings, recognizing the wide range and plurality of possible meanings of materiality in the communicative process. While Saussure “discovered” the difference between signifier (the word) and signified (the “something” named, the concept of imagination), Peirce recognized that understanding the messages and meanings of things required differentiating between different

types of signs or characters, as such distinguished by their relationships to what they denote (Berger 2014: 54).

According to Peirce, only one mode of nonverbal communication functions like verbal communication, where the relationship between sign and “materiality,” between signifier and signified, is determined by agreement or convention, as Saussure stated for the functioning of verbal communication. Thus today some traffic signs function effectively worldwide. Peirce called this mode of communication with respect to the type of sign involved, *symbol*. Connecting an abstract idea and message with the materiality that characterizes this symbol is pure convention. The second mode of nonverbal communication Peirce defined functions with the help of *icons*, signs that are understood by their similarity to what they denote. The icon, the signifier, is an image of the signified, similar to the original but not identical. The icon works best, of course, when similarities between what is shown and what is meant, the signifier and the signified, occur in a context whose specific character supports the message. In an airport, signposts with schematic illustrations of ascending and descending planes, which guide travelers to the departure or the arrival hall, are an example of context that supports the legibility of icons. It goes without saying that, also in this mode, understanding presupposes a common “language” between those involved in the communication. The third mode of nonverbal communication in Peirce’s model works through the presentation of a causal context, or a cause-consequence relationship: the sign he designated *index*, again according to the way it functions. In this case, the signifier is the result of the signified: for example, an animal’s footprints on snow-covered ground, or smoke as indicator of a fire.

Connotations in the Meaning of Things

Peirce’s thinking helps to channel the wide variety of possible meanings of materiality, and explains how a message transmitted on the basis of materiality, and sent with a certain intention, can be understood by a receiver, more or less in the intended sense. Moreover, his models make clear that decoding and understanding the message requires a different variety of skills and knowledge depending on the mode used to transmit it. As a rule, a thing or artifact *always* contains more messages and meanings than those originally intended when the thing was produced and used, or served as a medium of a message. In other words, the thing, the signifier, embodies an unlimited number of meanings and messages, hence connotations, “cultural meanings and myths” connected to the specific “thing” (Berger 2014: 47). Which spectrum of possible signified meanings (and functions) the object embraces depends on its user. It is the user who finally decides what to do with the

“things” in practice and how to understand their meanings. The “meanings” of material items and how to deal with them—thus their functioning—depend on context, custom, and practice (Hahn 2005). As Berger (2014: 55) summarizes, “a semiotic approach to material culture involves searching for the way these objects function as signs and generate meaning to others. From a semiotic perspective, nothing has a meaning in itself; an object’s meaning always derives from the network of relations in which it is embedded”—that is, context, knowledge, and practice. While a fundamental aim of semiotics is to explain the capacities of materiality as a medium of messages, semiotics also relegates the manifold possible kinds of meanings and connotations inherent in materiality beyond the denotations of the producers and depending on the variety of receivers and their potentially most differing contexts in which they receive the messages.

Berger (2014) has clearly explained the value of Peirce’s findings for material culture studies that address things made and decoded in the present. What Peirce contributes to archaeology is, first, to raise general awareness of the emblematic potential of materiality. His studies have underlined the importance of a common knowledge of the communicating parties for understanding the messages inherent in materiality (as postulated above), as well as the importance of contexts, to see the logic inherent in a nonverbally transmitted message. Raising an appropriate awareness simultaneously makes visible a specific methodological challenge of archaeological studies: How can we decide whether the object under investigation once stood for something completely different from what today’s scholar sees? If a *symbol* can only be recognized as such by convention, how, if at all, can archaeologists reconstruct appropriate conventions, let alone a symbol’s ancient meaning? Does an artifact’s resemblance to something known today (*icon*) match any analogue between object and knowledge in the past? And how can we today determine a cause-and-effect relationship (*index function of a thing*) between the preserved materiality and its causative reasons? The value of Peirce’s findings for archaeology lies less in a direct application to explaining the functions and meanings of things than in prompting attention to the potential of materiality as a medium of nonverbal communication. And it is then the elucidating of specific methodological challenges that archaeologists face when dealing with materiality as reference to communication processes that have taken place in the past.

Semiotic theory, in particular the work of C. S. Peirce, has recently figured in developing new approaches to ancient Near Eastern visual and material culture, in studies of signs and symbols on late prehistoric ceramics and seals from Iraq and Iran (Root 2005), Hittite images (Goedegebuure 2012: 416-24), and Neo-Assyrian seals (Winter 2000b). Zainab Bahrani (2008: 57-74; 2014: 61-63) has examined the practices of reading visual signs in ancient Mesopotamia from an explicitly semiotic perspective.

Reception Theory: The Receiver's Role in Nonverbal Communication

How were objects, especially that class of objects today that many appreciate today as “art,” viewed in antiquity? For the ancient Near East, Sumerian and Akkadian texts provide some information on how objects and their associated qualities were perceived (see Selz, this volume). But these texts illuminate only limited contexts, chiefly associated with temple and palace settings. What about prehistoric times, or cultural spheres that lack comparable written sources? How did ancient viewers understand the message in the materiality, and how can we investigate that process?

Reception theory, developed in the early 1970s in Germany and the United States, offers some promising avenues for us (Warning 1988; Gaither 1997; Funke 2004; Schneider 2004). In Germany, Hans Robert Jauss (1921–1997), literary scholar and professor of Romance languages and literature, and Wolfgang Iser (1926–2007), literary scholar and professor of English language and literature, both at the University of Constance, initiated a new perspective on the reception of texts. Both scholars focused on the role of the reader, the receiver of a text, and the impact on the text of her or his reception of the text. This approach differed sharply from the prevailing approach to a work and its effect, which mainly concentrated on the author and the text. The challenge in reading and interpreting a text, it was generally held, lay in identifying what the author's ideas, points of view, and intentions had been while writing the text. Turning away from this author-text focus, reception theory became interested in the reader's role and function as producer of “something new” when reading and interpreting a text. The Constance School argued against this neglect of the reader in binding the fate of every literary work indispensably to the reader. Without a reader, there was no literature. According to Jauss and Iser, the reader, or audience, emerged as more than merely a passive entity in the production and reception of a text—indeed, an active and influential participant in this process (Jauss 1970, 1982; Iser 1978).

This view of the reader's role amounted to a paradigm shift, drawing the perspectives and questions of any interpretation of the texts away from the author and the work alone to the recipients and their contexts. According to this shift, the meaning and significance of a text can never be final or objective, because the reader is understood as a decisive power in filling a text with meaning. With the readers' changing historical, social, and cultural contexts, the standpoints from which an interpretation is developed and the views on the texts and the interpretation of their meanings change. Given a continuously changing audience, the notion of a definitely valid interpretation is thus no longer defensible. Jauss (1970: 186) adopted Hans-Georg

Gadamer's critique of historical objectivism and propagated the conception of the (in principle) nonfinite interpretability of a text. Within reception history, all texts are thus subject to a dynamic process in which meanings are assigned, which can at the same time continually be modified. This process is considered as never completed. Those readers are not seen in this process as merely subjective judging actors, however. Instead, the context counts. The readers are situated in a particular historical and social context, within which they form and constitute a particular discourse-community with specific imaginations, expectations, values, and paradigms. Contexts thus shape methods and channel the questions guiding the reception. The discourses themselves are liable to change—not only in their historical dimensions, but also in the respective social contexts that are most influential in this process.

Contemporaneous with the development of the Constance School, the “Reader-Response Criticism” or Reader-Response Theory developed in the United States, with Norman Holland and Stanley Fish as its chief representatives (Davis and Womack 2002). Both scholars reacted against the “new criticism” approach developed during the 1920s and influential thereafter, which largely ignored the importance of the context in which a text was created as well as the relevance of the context in which the reception took place.

The Role of the Receiver and the Role of the Archaeologist

Reception theory's most important innovation was the perspective that the *reader* of a text, and not only the *producer*, is a creative and constitutive part of the production process. Each reading of a text by every different reader constitutes meanings and is accompanied by connotations that the author did not necessarily think of or intend. Thus a text can never have a final meaning, and as long as a text is read by different readers in different contexts, the readers' contexts and the readers themselves continue the “writing” of the text through reading and interpretation. This appreciation of the reader as simultaneously recipient and producer of a text affects how we understand the archaeologist's role and function in excavating and interpreting materiality. The value of reception theory for archaeology again lies in prompting awareness of the role and importance of the modern scholar's standpoint. It is thus the *etic* point of view that counts as creative. According to reception theory, the archaeologist is *constructing*, and not merely—if at all—*reconstructing* meaning when dealing with the material remains of the past. Historiography is thus “construction,” and the “construction of constructing history” becomes a never-ending story. Every archaeologist thus constantly “rewrites” the past. Just as every reader constantly constitutes (new) meanings

and connotations when reading a text, so does every archaeologist when dealing with past materiality.

The value of reception theory in revealing another critical impetus in the field of archaeological research is obvious. But we should ask whether this approach is indeed transferable in toto to archaeological research. My answer would be: *not really*. Emphasizing the role of the reader enabled an entirely new approach to dealing with texts. The fading out of the author, however, in my view seems too radical. It is the author who initially creates the text, which is then read and, according to the proponents of reception theory, constantly rewritten by the reader. Transferred to the archaeological context, this means that it is first the producers who, by acting in their context, created the materiality that allowed their contemporaries to receive the nonverbal message. It is the producers of the past who created the material expression that in the first place enables archaeologists to excavate, to “re-read” this materiality, to develop their interpretations of and add their meanings to the materiality, thus to continue the nonverbal communication and the “construction of constructing history.”

The Producers of Culture Initiate Communication

However important a focus on the reader or receiver of messages in nonverbal communication, the role and function of the producer (and her or his context) of any materiality, messages, or texts cannot be neglected, as reception theory seems to do. Here I briefly mention what the production of culture approach says about the role and function the producers and their contexts play in creating “culture.” In discussing nonverbal communication I repeatedly hinted at the importance of knowing the protagonists, the sender and receiver of the message, the context as the sphere in which the message was produced and had become possible or necessary, and the context in which the message was received. The producer of a message initiates the nonverbal communication. The producer and sender choose certain forms and raw materials. If it was intended to send a message with the product, it is the producer/sender who denotes what is sent, who shapes the message’s contents according to her or his intentions, aims, wishes, options, and needs. And it is the producer’s/sender’s context that, to a significant degree, influences the action of this producer/sender at the outset. Without a producer, there is no recipient and no reception of any message.

Reception theory’s great achievements in emphasizing the roles and functions of the participating “receiver” in the communication process can thus not be fully understood without considering the equally influential roles and functions of the producers and their contexts. A group of scholars represented chiefly by the American sociologists Richard A. Peterson and Diana Crane

developed the so-called “production of culture” approach (Peterson 1972; Crane 1992; Danko 2011: 95–100; see Bourdieu 1993). The questions this group asks are of interest for our concerns. It focused primarily on who the producers of art and culture were and how art and culture are *produced*—and not what art and culture *are*. Also relevant here is the interest in “how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Peterson and Anand 2004: 311, cited in Danko 2011: 96). Context of producer and production, and the users’ context, are thus the fields to be explored in order to understand the development and functioning of art and culture, in the archaeologists’ context the production and use of materiality and its inherent messages.

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) was perhaps the most prominent sociologist to deal with and explain the formative effect of contexts, the *habitus*, and thus the reciprocal influence of contexts on human action (Bourdieu 1963; [1972] 1977; [1980] 1990; [1992] 1996; Kraus and Gebauer 2002; Rehbein 2006; Schumacher 2011). Taking contexts seriously and accepting that contexts matter means studying the contexts of producers and of receivers in order to reflect implicitness, intention, and denotation in the production of materiality as well as connotations in their past reception (*emic*) and by the archaeologists (*etic*).

For the ancient Near Eastern field, pioneering studies by Irene Winter (2000a) explored visibility in Mesopotamia, analyzing the producers and recipients of texts and images. A recent trend critically discusses the modern reception of Near Eastern antiquity, seeking to understand ways in which modern conceptual frameworks have influenced the study and reconstruction of antiquity (Bohrer 2003; Evans 2012; Chi and Azara 2015).

Poststructuralism

Given the great diversity of thinking subsumed under *poststructuralism*, I offer a concise presentation of what I consider comparable aspects of the basic ideas developed in different scholarly fields that are often assembled under this heading (Münker and Roesler 2000; Stäheli 2000; Baberowski 2005; Berressem 2005). Reception theory, especially reader-response approaches, share aspects of the basic ideas subsumed under poststructuralism. Yet these approaches developed in different contexts and, compared with other strands in poststructuralism, are perhaps less “radical” in their departure from traditional ways of approaching literature and interpretation. All representatives of the “new thinking,” however, owe much to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.

Poststructuralism is not to be understood as anti-structuralism, but rather as a

modified and broadened variety of intellectual thought, for which structuralism provides a kind of starting point for subsequent reflections on how the world emerges in our minds. The numerous philosophers and cultural and literary theorists connected with the term poststructuralism—Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault—cannot be unified under a clearly defined common concept or shared research method. The common feature of all theoretical reflections subsumed under *poststructuralism* perhaps lies in their radical questioning of traditionally valid concepts of rationality, objectivity, and authenticity. While the structuralist approach demanded a scientific and objective access in dealing with appropriate questions, the poststructuralist community vigorously and clearly questioned the term and even the existence of “objectivity.”

All representatives of the poststructuralist approach also share a focus and emphasis on the special significance of language and other sign systems in constructing and establishing conceptions of the world. These thinkers adopted as a basic assumption the perception concerning the arbitrariness of signs developed by Saussure: there is no necessary, but rather an arbitrary connection between word and object, signifier and signified. While the structuralists postulated the existence of stable structures of meaning, however, the poststructuralists emanate from a general indeterminacy. Thus *a priori* aspects such as plurality, diversity of voices, ambiguity, and inconsistency become legitimate phenomena of scholarly analyses. As a consequence, looking for the real meaning of an issue was given up in interpreting phenomena and the existence of a single true sense denied. Accordingly, the poststructuralist perspective allows a reading of the world as such understood as text, beyond and in opposition to any traditional conventions and standards, and makes the reader the center of events. Denying the existence of any objective and actual sense or meaning, each reader’s reading becomes as such a creative act. This way of thinking, however, prompted the criticism that interpretations would then become random, optional, reader-defined—all the more, when the recipient’s individual impression becomes applicable as the sole instance in the interpretation. As a final consequence, there can then no longer be a distinction between correct and false reading and interpretation if a search for the real meaning of an issue is abandoned. In an extreme case, poststructuralism would result in “anything goes.”

With the development of discourse analysis, probably one of the most significant impulses in poststructuralist theory-building, Michel Foucault (1926–1984) established a constructive “barrier” to this indefinite thinking propagated especially by the deconstructionists. The focus of Foucault’s analysis in dealing with communication in the widest sense, in considering and analyzing texts or artifacts, is neither the author/producer and her or his

intention, nor the reader or receiver. Very simply put, Foucault's interest centered instead on the question of what particular conditions in the course of time had allowed people to establish their respective thinking about the world and the conviction that what they saw and said was the truth, the "right" way to see the world—a mode of research that became known as "discourse analysis." In Foucault's (1971) thought, texts and artifacts each emerge in their own contexts, which comprise the valid fields of cultural knowledge and cultural practices (Palmer 1997; Veyne 2008; Raffnsøe, Thaning, and Gudmand-Hoyer 2015). In turn, they shape the way that valid imaginations of reality and "truth" are established at any given time: that is, each prevailing system of knowledge determines the possibility or impossibility of a set knowledge. The state of knowledge thus has to be ascertained as reference of the self-conception, the categories of cognition and the modes of thought of a society, and the conditions of possibility also have to be explored that made a given system of knowledge possible. As Palmer (1997: 92) explains it, "each society has its régime of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true."

With this thinking, in a way, Foucault set a frame on the unlimited "anything goes" postulated by the deconstructionists and gave back to context and actors, producers, and receivers their share in "producing and reading." At the same time, his approach also opened a path for archaeologists to think again and anew about how to gain insights into the emic worldviews, into the discourse of the past.

Poststructuralism—and Some Thoughts about its Relevance for Archaeology

According to poststructuralist thought, the traditional hermeneutic access to archaeological contexts, as elucidated above, follows the "wrong" way, since it presupposes that there was "a sense" in the material heritage created by past actors. Furthermore, it would be fruitless to look for any emic understanding of past materiality. If objectivity does not exist, in the poststructuralists' view it would not be worth seeking any interpretation of the material other than that of each individual scholar. The traditional hermeneutic attempt to analyze particular contexts in order to gain insights into the emic from the etic point of view, and thus to clarify the question "who is speaking," could therefore be abandoned in favor of the answer: the archaeologist is speaking. As Bjørnar Olsen (2006: 90) comments, "a post-structuralist approach ... emphasizes *how* things mean, what thoughts they stimulate; it investigates and affirms the plurality of meanings obtained by things being re-read by new people in

contexts. Such readings are more a matter of translation and negotiation than of recovering.”

Whether the philosophy of poststructuralism in its entire spectrum is relevant for archaeological research will have to be decided by individual scholars. My own skepticism should by now be obvious. In my view, being encouraged to consider the possible range of interpretations and connotations when a context is studied by archaeologists from different backgrounds in order to clarify the role and influence of different standpoints in dealing with history, is highly inspiring. Furthermore, as Olsen (2006: 97) observes, “first and foremost poststructuralist textualism constituted a vital source of theoretical inspiration. By questioning the obviousness of the traditional hermeneutic approach to interpretation, it provoked reflection on how we interpret things, on what entities are involved in the meaning-creative process and on their mutual relationship.” Denying the relevance of the producers and the interactions between producers and receivers in their diverse contexts, however, seems not to be meaningful in dealing with material heritage. Discourse analysis also seems promising for the archaeological study of materiality. The challenge this approach poses for archaeological research is how to deduce discourses from materiality, thus from a “reality” that exists as a non-discursive one beyond discourse. Materiality, in my view, is just there (see also Olsen 2006: 97). What archaeologists have to consider is how to capture the conditions of possibility that led, as discussed earlier, to each prevailing system of knowledge.

Poststructuralist approaches have influenced the field project launched in 1993 at the site of Çatalhöyük in south central Turkey. It has explicitly adopted a “reflexive” approach that addresses every aspect of data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation (Hodder 2000), embracing efforts to include and represent multiple voices (e.g., Atalay 2012).

Conclusions

Archaeological contexts as well as the role of the archaeologist are specific ones when it comes to investigating communicative action—both in the past and the present. The researcher establishes a situation of nonverbal communication with the past, while at the same time attempting to gain insight into the part of that nonverbal communication that the excavated material presents. My discussion of the functional principles of nonverbal communication and the debate over the meaning of contexts should thus, as a beginning, clarify the roles of all protagonists and concomitants, producer, contexts and user, involved in communicative activity. The material heritage of the past simultaneously represents the medium and the results of communication. Materiality and archaeological contexts are not “texts,”

however. They are beyond discourse, illustrating the materialized results of social action, incorporating sense and meaning created by the protagonists—including the researching archaeologist. It is thus not only the reader (the scholar) that I consider the most important constituent in dealing with materiality as the medium of a message.

From this perspective, certain strands of poststructuralism and reception theory seem not to be fully applicable to archaeological research. Nevertheless, this chapter has attempted to identify the most productive of the various theories. First and foremost, these theories provide those concerned with the past in general with a profound knowledge about how communication functions and the various views of the roles of materiality and contexts in its processes. Semiotics, critical theory, and the production of culture perspective offer complex and holistic approaches and allow the value of all protagonists and instances involved in communicative activity to be respected. Second, these theoretical approaches also make archaeologists aware of their own specific role when dealing with the past, when constructing stories while aiming at reconstructing history. As indicated above, I consider Foucault's discourse theory, his search for the conditions of possibility under which context-specific systems of knowledge emanate (contexts matter!) to be one of the most inspiring and at the same time theoretically and methodologically challenging approaches for archaeologists investigating communicative activity—both in the past and in the present.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

My review of the literature draws extensively on German scholarship. In addition to works cited in the text, see Aulinger 1992, Mittelstraß 2004, Nünning 2005, Pany 2000, Steets 2015, and Strasen 2008. For English-language publications, recent handbooks of material culture with useful introductions to nonverbal communication include Tilley et al. 2006, and Hicks and Beaudry 2010. For semiotics, see Bal 1998, Layton 2006, Preucel 2006, and Cobley 2010. Kemp 1998 and Trimble 2015 provide accessible introductions to the reception theories of Jauss and Iser, with special reference to the visual arts. Helpful discussions of poststructuralist approaches include Olsen 2006 and Raffnsøe, Thaning, and Gudmand-Hoyer 2015. Additional bibliography is cited below.

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PART II

CRITICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

CHAPTER TEN

Representation

Dominik Bonatz and Marlies Heinz

Introduction

We could very briefly define *to represent* as “to make something absent present, to make something hidden visible.”¹ Representation is a process by which signification is constituted (Wagner 2005: 188–89; Hall 2013: 45).

In this chapter we focus on the “cultural” application, that is, we forego treating the neurological processes involved in representation. Yet even with this narrower focus it is impossible to consider either the full semantic range of the term or the immense potential areas of its application. We have thus selected those approaches most useful to studies of ancient Near Eastern art and archaeology in understanding and grappling with the phenomenon of representation. Selected examples illustrate some of the problems and issues presented in specific historical and cultural contexts.

An Expanded Definition of Representation

Representation, the “process by which signification is constituted, functions by referring and substituting,” and creates ambiguity and alteration (Wagner 2005: 189). The complex term *signification* should be further differentiated into *signification* and *meaning*, a distinction we consider crucial. *Signification* indicates that a word and an object have a reference to each other: they are connected through convention, as semiotics has shown. The naming of an object should be understood as a kind of elementary *denotation* of the object, which everyone in a given culture would understand and mostly agree with (Latin *denotare*; to describe, indicate). Representation as a process by which meaning is constituted also involves the concept of *connotation* (Latin *connotatio*; connotation). The object denoted is at the same time connected to a wider field of *meanings*, which are not consistently shared even within a single culture. Rather, the connotations of a denoted object depend on ideology, wishes, and needs.

As the findings of semiotics have made clear, the act of representation creates something neither visible nor tangible, but rather a mental image (*denotation*) and second-level meanings (*connotation*). This process takes place in the

mind of the individual and yet is simultaneously influenced and shaped by the cultural conditions, or contexts, in which representations develop. Transferred to things, or material remains, or to any human action, this means that a material object (or human action) can stand for something that is as such not there, but exists in the mind of anyone who contemplates the object or action. Whenever humans act and come into contact with things, any material object or action is potentially always more than simply an object or action. Representation can thus only be comprehended discursively, by verbal communication, reading statements, or encountering practices when dealing with things. In his landmark study of representation, the cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (2013: 45) combined the aspects of language, things, and signs in his definition: “representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning.”

Art History and Approaches to Interpreting Representations

Art history was the first discipline to integrate available knowledge about the functioning and meaning of representation into the study and analysis of material remains, or “art.” It developed methods by which it could apply the insights of sociology and cultural studies and so approach an object in order to understand its meanings, or discover what it represents. Art history deals both with phenomena of the visible and tangible sphere and with immaterial entities in paintings, sculpture, architecture, and other genres. Iconography is one means of understanding and explaining the multiple spheres or levels that objects potentially embrace (Panofsky 1939; van Straten 1989).

In Erwin Panofsky’s scheme, analysis of an object (for example, a picture) begins with a *pre-iconographical description*, listing the elements that a researcher identifies in the picture, thus establishing the level of *denotations* that can be captured. Denotations should lead to statements about the object that viewers can mostly agree on—and which may even match those that the objects bore in the past. The subsequent steps in interpretation expose the particular challenges ancient Near Eastern specialists encounter in reconstructing past meanings. The next step, *iconographical description*, attempts to find meaningful connections between the individual elements of a picture that form a logical theme. The result should thus lead to identifying the theme of the picture. Establishing such connections presupposes that the investigator commands insights into the cultural knowledge of the period in which the picture was created, including both its rules about things and the conventions that were used to present them. A more in-depth analysis follows with *iconographical interpretation*, in which the investigator tries to capture a

picture's symbolic meanings, the *connotations* the producer intended. If direct questioning of the producer is not feasible, the investigator would turn to any available written evidence for the producer's intentions. Obviously it is never possible to question past actors, and ancient Near Eastern specialists seldom have at their disposal texts that offer relevant information.

Beyond the personal intentions of a producer or artist, the symbolic meanings of things, topics, and themes reflect general knowledge and the discourses of a particular time and place and its population. To grasp these connotations—the meanings that the representation of something, the elements, and the theme of a pictorial representation stood for at a particular time—is an even more challenging step, undertaken through an *iconological interpretation*. To conduct an *iconological interpretation* presupposes not only a thorough knowledge of the discourses and discourse structures of the time. The investigators also have to clarify *whose* connotations they are seeking and whose worldview the evidence might express.

In dealing with objects, artifacts, and “art,” art history thus provides archaeological investigations with a manageable way to approach a search for the phenomenon of “representation.” Representing a past is primarily mediated by language and written texts, both primary instruments of representation and both powerful tools in the production of “truth” and meanings. Composing texts thus requires a critical handling of words and concepts. A discursive approach keeps alive the consciousness that “archaeologically made representations of pasts” are a “construction” of history which always also implies the production of meanings—meanings given in the past to the things studied and meanings produced by scholars today when writing the narrative of this past. Whose meaning is thus presented in this process of reconstructing history constitutes a most important question. Establishing meaning is a powerful instrument in producing representations. It influences the thinking and acting not only of the representations' recipients, but also those of their producers. The authority of scholars to create “representations of pasts” is thus itself a formidable means of power.

The Material Perspective: The Ontology of Mesopotamian Objects

simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game—total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.

Baudrillard on the third order of simulacra (1994: 121)

Bearing in mind the challenges described, and addressing the world of

material objects from the ancient Near East, we will essentially leave aside classical philosophical concepts of representation or *repraesentatio* and the extensive Western discussion of artistic representation.² The main obstacle to deploying those concepts is that we cannot define what was (or was not) an image in the ancient Near East, although scholars have dealt with this problem at length (Beran 1989; Winter 1992; Berlejung 1998; Bonatz 2002; Bahrani 2003, 2014). The heuristic triangle underlying the classical definitions of representation—a thing, its actual image, and a mental image—arises from the assumption that an image is an artificial creation and that the mental image causes a sensation, perception, or conception that corresponds to the actual image but not to the thing (Summers 2003: 3). But what if the image is not regarded as different from the thing? What if it is an incarnation, a simulacrum, or simulation, in which the distinction between reality and imagination is overridden? In this case, it can no longer be called an image in the strict sense; it becomes a virtuality (Baudrillard 1994). The following examples are discussed under the premise that they may have constituted different modes of reality, so the critical term *representation* is reviewed from a perspective that is essentialist rather than art-theoretical.³

The art historian Hans Belting (2001: 150–54; 2013: 44–49) has recently treated the Levantine plastered skulls (Figure 10.1), skull statuettes, and masks dating to the eighth millennium BCE from a perspective grounded in visual anthropology and cultural history. For him, these archaeological objects are located at the beginning of an evolution of the image that is linked to death and mortuary cult. They recreate the lost body of the deceased, and as images they act as media of its new presence in which the body is withdrawn from time and mortality (e.g., Belting 2001: 154). Zainab Bahrani, however, disagrees with Belting's characterization of the plastered skulls as a symbolic body to replace the mortal one. In her view, “the skull is linked to the absent person in a substantial way, so that it is not a representation, but a partition and distribution of personhood” (Bahrani 2014: 51). Michael Leicht (2002: 30–32) puts his critique in more fundamental terms: he questions Belting's approach to treating the plastered skulls and related Neolithic visual artifacts as imagery. Quoting Ernst Cassirer, Leicht argues that, on the contrary, the skulls do not set a scene that would constitute something different from the world of tangible experiences. They stand in their own context as “ein unmittelbar-Wirkliches, weil als ein unmittelbar-Wirksames” (something immediately real, because [it is] something with immediate effect), and hence stand opposed to the function—proper to the image—of dissociation, or alienation, from reality (Leicht 2002: 31).



Figure 10.1 Human skulls overmodeled with “gypsum.” Syria, Tell Aswad; Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (8200–6900 BCE), no. 741-CS3.

Photo: Laurent Dugué. Fouille franco-syrienne de Tell Aswad (direction: D. Stordeur, B. Jamous). MPK, Ministère des Affaires étrangères France.

We would agree with Leicht’s critique, mainly because it acknowledges that it is not the materiality of an artifact that constitutes its ontological status as an image, but those historical and cultural factors that determine its perception. We may perceive the Neolithic skulls and masks as images because they strongly resemble portrayals of individuals and recall for us what we consider to be the proper art-aesthetic values of imagery. For the ancients, however, the reality of these “images” would have been quite different from modern realities. One need only observe how the skulls and masks figure in the monographs cited above. The illustrations are in high resolution, partly in color with clean, spotlighted background, radically separated from their archaeological context. This artificial decontextualization brings about what Jean Baudrillard (2000: 264) has identified as the making of an image, that is, to clear from an object “all its dimensions, its weight, spatiality, fragrance, depth, time, continuity and of course its meaning.” By contrast, the in situ picture of two skulls from Tell Aswad in Syria (see [Figure 10.1](#)) still evokes at least some of these sensations. Even from a very distant time we can still grasp weight, spatiality, fragrance, depth, time, and continuity, and we can even understand the sense of magic that surrounds these visual recreations. The intimacy between the two heads can lead us even further toward the notion of virtuality. The heads have their own agency and they communicate with each other independent of the mind of any viewer in attendance.

We can reconstruct a series of elaborate rituals behind the creation, display,

and deposition of the plastered skulls or the performances carried out with the masks, and we can quite reasonably conclude that these rituals and performances were related to death and ancestor rituals. In this context, they reconstruct a body but do not create its image. One could argue, furthermore, that they simulate a body that had the power to interact and to act.⁴ Its function was not to make the absent visible, but to manifest the presence of the absent (see also Leicht 2002: 32). This interpretation is in principle consonant with Bahrani's statement cited above, that "the skull is linked to the absent person in a substantial way, so that it is not a representation, but a partition and distribution of personhood." But what about the aspect of representation that is the key term in our discussion? Does the partition and distribution of personhood indeed avoid representation? And must a visual representation be an image, or can the quality of being an image be embodied in any kind of artifact if its historical context demonstrates the process of constituting signification, as noted in our introduction?

Just as with the Neolithic plastered skulls, to know but not necessarily to see that these artifacts were there is probably among the fundamentals of ancient Near Eastern visual culture, which—and this is perhaps the major obstacle posed by the Western notion—never developed a public media culture, as was the case in the later Greek and Roman periods. At least from the Uruk period (ca. 3500–3000 BCE) on, the use of images, or what we tend to call images, became a prerogative of institutionalized elites who ruled in an urbanized world. We have to assume that until the end of the first millennium BCE access to a "representative image" would have been a privilege for rather few people, or an order to people who were forced to submit under the power of images (see Bachelot 1991). Most of the populations living in non-elite sectors of cities, suburban areas, and villages would probably never have seen even one of the sophisticated artworks that usually circulate in publications on ancient Near Eastern art. Moreover, a wide range of visual as well as textual artifacts were buried or concealed, so that human eyes would never, or only exceptionally, have beheld them. The intangibility of images may have clothed them with such an aura of efficacy and magic that powerful, pervasive, and enduring moods and motivations in humans became uniquely realistic. This perception embraces not only monumental art—images of gods, monsters, and human beings—but also distinct object classes, such as votive plaques, seals, and prophylactic figurines. As manifestations of the real they mediate between the world of the living, the supernatural that constitutes this world, and the past and future. As Zainab Bahrani has sought to demonstrate with her system of "Babylonian semiotics," it is the key point of the binary division of the real, on the one hand, and representation, on the other, that distinguishes the ancient Near East from Western concepts of representation (Bahrani 2003: 121–48; 2014: 62–67). In ancient Mesopotamian thought, representation worked not by imitating real things, but in order to present things that exist (see also Porter 2014: 598).

Within this conceptual framework, self-representation through presentation becomes an important issue in interpreting ancient Near Eastern images. The well-known Stele of the Vultures from Lagash (see [Figure 11.3](#) in Collins, this volume) provides an excellent example of how these two categories fit into a comprehensive manifestation of reality. On one side of the monument, King Eannatum of Lagash conducts a victorious war against the neighboring city-state of Umma. On the other side, the war is mythologized by showing Ningirsu, the city-state's patron god, defeating the enemies. In the contemporaneous perception of these events, the god has commissioned the king to combat the notorious enemies of Lagash and thus protect the god's territory. After having successfully fulfilled this duty, the king represents himself by presenting the god as the guarantor of his triumph on the same monument.

The Stele of the Vultures has been widely discussed as the first monument that sets a historical event in a visual narrative (Winter [1985](#)). Yet from textual sources we know that this event was only one in a long series of violent territorial conflicts between Lagash and Umma (Cooper [1983](#)). The stele clearly marks the ritualization of this conflict, the ritual of war as a whole. Ritual acts are even embedded in the visual imagery: in the oaths sworn by Umma's defeated ruler on the god's "great battle net," and the sacrifice in front of the burial mound of dead soldiers. In ritual theory, the power of ritual builds upon self-representation through presentation (Dücker [2007](#): 50–57), which is based on the precondition that the object to be presented has a supernatural or institutional quality that is superior and atemporal to the subject, the "self-representer," which carries out the ritual and thus repeatedly confirms the role of the object. In the case of the Stele of the Vultures, the relation between god and king mirrors this reciprocity. Consequently, it is not an image of this reciprocity; it is the mere manifestation of its reality. Further, it is not the narration of a historical event, but a real thing that keeps a mythological truth existing.

The ontology of ancient Mesopotamian objects, especially those we tend to label as images (see below), emanates from the prerequisite of agency (see Winter [2007](#)). Objects had the capacity to act not only *for* but also *as* that individual for whom they were made or obtained. This is also one of the main reasons why iconoclasm was a constant threat to the life of Mesopotamian images. The destruction or "killing" of an object animated with divine or human agency would have implied the death of the referent. From the Sumerian period onward many, mostly politically motivated instances attest to this practice, as do the curses against iconoclasm and inscriptoclasm (for a recent compilation see the contributions in May [2012](#)). Only the Hittites demonstrate a different cultural perspective inasmuch as they apparently did not merge images with their referents; hence the lack of iconoclasm in this area (Goedegebuure [2012](#)). The embeddedness of human agency in objects

(Sumerian **alan**, Akkadian *šalmu*) is particularly striking for the Early Dynastic “votive” statues, and it continues throughout Mesopotamian history (Evans 2012). As Anne Porter (2014) intriguingly hypothesizes, the statues and stelae of the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BCE) already mark the transition from local to global relationships in that they constituted a living network of the king’s (divine) presence over a formerly unimaginably large territory. Around one and a half millennia later, Neo-Assyrian royal representations still intersect with this older tradition, yet they also open new dimensions in the partibility of a person, which, as argued here, enclose the power of representation in an unpredictable and indefinite virtual circuit.

Neo-Assyrian Art and the Vocabulary of Representation

The statues of Neo-Assyrian kings (Figure 10.2) have most prominently figured in recent debates concerning problems of ideology, representation, and portraiture in ancient Mesopotamian visual arts (e.g., Winter 1997: 364–67, fig. 6; 2009: 262–70, fig. 11; Bonatz 2002: 11–17, fig. 2; Bahrani 2003: 121–48, figs. 7–8; Ornan 2014: 585, fig. 7; see also Machinist 2006: 177–78). At a certain point, all these discussions center on the critical Akkadian term *šalmu*, which is usually translated as “image.” *Šalmu*, however, not only designates three-dimensional statues, but is also a generic term for freestanding stone stelae, rock reliefs, drawings, figurines, and depictions on seals, in so far as they functioned as representations.⁵ Yet representation is a complex analytic category also when we inquire into ancient Near Eastern thought, on which our essay has so far touched in only a few of its possible interpretations.



Figure 10.2 Statue of King Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Nimrud, temple of Ishtar Belit Mati. Magnesite on reddish dolomite stand; h. statue 1.13 m.

British Museum ME 118871. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

As far as royal statues are concerned, representation is entangled with the question of portraiture. Does the statue of the Assyrian king represent a portrait of a historical figure? Irene Winter (2009: 269) has offered sophisticated reflections on this problem, concluding that “what we are presented with in the image of the king ‘in his office of kingship’ is a semiotic, rather than a mimetic, representation.” She is content to regard the statue of an Assyrian king as a portrait, under the assumption that physical likeness is not a necessary condition for a portrait (Winter 2009: 266, following Zerner 1993). It is the political dimension of representation that allowed the *šalmu* of the Assyrian king to bear all the human and divine signs that constitute the office of kingship. The complex Assyrian notion of “sign-representation that takes place in the realm of the real” (Bahrani 2014: 73) brings up another argument for understanding the *šalmu* of the king as a simulacrum in Baudrillard’s sense. “The head of a state—no matter which one—is nothing but the simulacrum of himself and only that gives him the power and the quality to govern” (Baudrillard 1994: 26). In Assyria, the king’s ability to rule was established through his relationship to the divine (Machinist 2006) and supported by the metaphysics of a scribal-sacerdotal elite (Ataç 2010). The annals of Adad-narari II (911–891 BCE), for example, describe the king as being created by the gods, who make perfect his features, fill him with wisdom, decree his destiny, then entrust him with the scepter and *melammu* (divine radiance) (Grayson 1991: 147, 5–9). In the praise of an Assyrian priest, the king “is the likeness in every way of the god” (Machinist 2006: 174–75). This paraphrase necessarily indicates that the “portrait” of the king could not have physiognomically resembled a historical individual but was intended to represent the ideal of his divine appearance (see also Winter 2009: 269).

Remarkably enough, the statue of Assurnasirpal II illustrated here (see Figure 10.2) is not life-sized: it measures only 1.13 meters in height, a fact that is omitted in almost all the publications mentioned above. A proportional correspondence with the original of the living king was obviously not sought in this representation, because its primary goal was not to copy or to imitate a human being. Instead, it accords with the small dimensions of Mesopotamian cult statues that represented minor gods and could reflect a hierarchical position ancillary to the great gods (Berlejung 1998: 43–45). The task of such a statue was not to equal a human or divine subject, but to represent his efficacy (Berlejung 1998: 41). Visual means of “upgrading” the king to a godlike image are found on royal representations in three-dimensional statues and reliefs (see Ornan 2014: 585–89), but are also embedded in homologies with representations of gods and other supernatural beings. For example, the physiognomic resemblance between the face of the king and the face of the *lamassu*, the apotropaic guardian figure of the royal palaces, clearly conflates the godlike quality of both characters. Concurrently with this effort toward an absolute correspondence with the supernatural real, the statue of a king, or the

relief on a stele or rock relief, approaches an absolute correspondence with itself; and this is not contradictory, it is the very definition of the hyperreal (after Baudrillard 1994: 47).⁶

The *šalmu* is the statue and the statue is the hyperreal thing, the simulacrum of simulation, which became alive with the inscribed name of the king to whom it refers.⁷ So why should we call it an image, if it was a being in its own right? It has a pictorial quality (German *Bildlichkeit*), although this quality was an essential prerequisite to acquiring agency and taking on an active role in visual communication. In Alfred Gell's terms, the statue as a visual art object "captivates" and "fascinates" through its "virtuosity" (Gell 1998). Therefore, and in agreement with Irene Winter (1997) and Mario Fales (2009), we assume that the Assyrians did indeed strive for physical likeness and physiognomic accuracy when it came to producing a royal representation. This aesthetic aim was bound by strict conventions, however, which, aspiring to timeless authenticity, divine resemblance, and extension of personhood, would have prohibited the rendering of individualistic traits.⁸ The consistent frontality of royal statues, especially their faces, is an important aesthetic means in this respect. It enabled the simulacrum of the king to distance itself from a human audience and instead to glance down at its subjects and look up to the gods—the latter probably the statue's more important function, as it was designed to stand in the center of a temple.

As quoted earlier, "representation, the process by which signification is constituted, functions by referring and substituting." The *šalmu*/statue of the Assyrian king does both: it refers and it substitutes, and by completing its complex process of signification it achieved such an aura of efficacy that it continues to react and enact without any human measures. Here we reach the point of ideology as staging of power. To quote Baudrillard (1994: 27), "ideology only corresponds to a corruption of reality through signs; simulation corresponds to a short circuit of reality and to its duplication through signs. It is always the goal of the ideological analysis to restore the objective process, it is always a false problem to wish to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum."

Our interpretation of the royal *šalmu* as simulacrum and the hyperreal representation of kingship appears simple, however, because we see the consistency between the visual concept of the representation and its material form, the stone sculpture in the round (German *Bildträger*). Yet there are several instances of *šalmu* for which such consistency is not present. For example, on the stele of Bel-Harran-beli-usur (Figure 10.3), the commissioner of the monument, an Assyrian provincial governor during the reigns of Shalmaneser IV (782–772 BCE) and Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE), is depicted with the gesture of adoration and communication (Akkadian *ubāna tarāšu*) in front of the symbols of the gods: Marduk, Nabu, Shamash, Sin, and Ishtar (from left to right). In the stele's inscription Bel-Harran-beli-usur states,

“I inscribed a stele (NA₄.NA.RÚ.A) (and) I put on it the ‘images’ (*šalam*) of the gods” (after Unger 1917: 15). The text not only provides a different term for the monument (*narû*), but also distinguishes the symbols of the gods represented on this monument by clearly labeling them as the *šalmē* and not the monument itself. The “image” of Bel-Harran-beli-usur is not mentioned in the inscription, but we can infer from the stele and rock reliefs of Assyrian kings, which are the prototypes for this standard representation, that the depiction of the human figure in front of the divine symbols is also denoted as *šalmu*.⁹ Hence the stele provides the material (and unanimated) frame for the opposition of two classes of *šalmē*, anthropomorphic-human and symbolic-divine, with the clear visual message that the human part is communicating with the world of the divine.



Figure 10.3 Stele of Bel-Harran-beli-usur. Iraq, Tell Abta; reigns of Shalmaneser IV (782–772 BCE) and Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE). Alabaster; 1.83 × 1.15 m. Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri 1326.

Getty Images © De Agostini/G. Dagil Orti.

Again the notion of the stele as a medium conveys the idea of self-representation through presentation in a strictly canonized and ritualized form. But the complex problem of the term *šalmu* in this context, and the sustainable impression of object agency in the visual culture of the ancient

Near East, leads to the conclusion that here, too, our modern perception of an image-representation is not sufficient for understanding the ontology of this kind of pictorial construction. The *šalmē* interact, they are linked in reciprocity within the pictorial space. They do *not* need to be viewed by any private or public audience, but would have acted autonomously at the places they were erected: in temples, palaces, and city gates of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, or as landmarks on its periphery (see Fales 2009: 278–79; Bonatz 2012a). So they mark presence, on the one hand, and are thus obvious representations of an Assyrian world order in a specific historical situation.¹⁰ On the other hand, they follow the principles of autopoiesis: within the Assyrian system of expansion every act of conquest demands the erection of a new stele, so that the process of image-making was a repetitive act of self-reproduction. We are indeed inclined to label the standard stelae and inscriptions, including their variants on rock reliefs, as early mass media, following the critique and definitions of Niklas Luhmann (2009). He argues that the reality of mass media works on the assumption that its own communication will be continued in the next hour or day. Each broadcast promises another broadcast. *It is never about the representation of the world as it is right now.*

The Assyrian *šalmē* were never meant to represent a certain moment in history. Their coming into the world was often related to an important single ritual act (Bonatz 2012a: 64), but since it was a ritual it was again within the repetitive circle of Assyrian autopoiesis. Instead, they came into the real for eternity. With such an understanding in mind, they recall simulations in the postmodern definition of the simulacrum, for which the distinction between original and copy, prototype and likeness, reality and imagination has gradually faded away.

There is, however, another category of Assyrian visual representations—the large series of palace reliefs—for which our skepticism about what was actually perceived as an image might be suspended, because at first glance they encompass most of the aspects we would consider typical of images. They are framed, set as tableaux along the palace walls, and narrate historical events, which they illustrate in a way that has many similarities with the original details of the event—but apparently with a continuous “iconic difference” that constitutes the principle of any pictorial sense (Boehm 1994: 30). By iconic difference is meant that the visual message of these reliefs is the result of the visual contrast that is artistically and intentionally optimized by means of form, style, perspective, etc. The Akkadian term *tamšilu* could indeed reveal the ancient sense of the iconic difference (Bonatz 2002: 14–17). Significantly, the term is never used to designate a divine cult object (Berlejung 1998: 72), but in at least one instance is used to distinguish between the statue (*šalmu*) of an Assyrian ruler (Assurnasirpal II) as representation of his kingship (*šalam šarrutā*) and the “replica”/likeness of

his physical body (*tamšil bunannā*).¹¹ This is not proof, but it is still a valuable hint, that the Assyrians had two different modes of perceiving a pictorial representation: first, as a being in its own right, the simulacrum; and second, as the artificial imitation of the real. But, as we argue here, there was obviously a fluid boundary, rather than a conscious division, between these two modes of perception.

“Picture, image (in the sense of German *Abbild*) or replica” would probably be the appropriate terms for translating *tamšilu* (see also Westenholz 2000: 113; Fales 2009: 261). The word derives from the verb *mušalu*, “to resemble,” and can refer to human beings and animals, material objects, and landscapes.¹² In one Assyrian oracle even the empire was conceived of as the replica (*tamšilu*) of the divine world, referred to as the “Kingdom of Heaven” (Parpola 1997: lxxxii n. 25). As a further example, Sargon II refers in an inscription to his park at Dur-Sharrukin as “the exact picture/replica of the

Amanus Mountains” (*tamšil kur^H amani*, after Fuchs 1993: 66:41). This is an interesting pictorial notion, a rather photographic view, stressing that what we see (or what the Assyrian king saw) is indeed expected to resemble the original. Yet, as modern art criticism consistently emphasizes, photographs as representations do not merely picture an original: they construct it. The same apparently holds true for the Assyrian palace reliefs, which are pictorial constructions of a real event, and which also fall under the broad category of *tamšilu* (Bonatz 2002: 17).

In the multi-perspectival and multi-figural representations on the Assyrian palace reliefs, with their continuous series of military accounts, building activities, and royal hunts, the paramount figure is the king. He structures the semantics and syntax of the narrative and he is the author of his own royal deeds (see Winter 1981, 1983; Lumsden 2004; Bonatz 2012b). But he is not a storyteller like Saint John the Divine on the famous late fourteenth-century Apocalypse tapestry in Angers, where Saint John presents to the spectator the different scenes of the Apocalypse from his Book of Revelation while he himself appears at the fringe of most of these scenes as narrator outside the story (Mesqui 2001). The Assyrian king, instead, is *within* the story; he is the main actor and director of the scene. We would thus argue that the concept of *šalmu* was transferred into the representation of the Assyrian king on the palace reliefs inasmuch as the historical act, the act of presenting the royal deeds to gods and preserving it for future kings¹³ and the act of self-representing the Assyrian ideology of kingship, became irrevocably reality in the (pictorial) presence of the royal figure. Irene Winter (1983) observed that the relief cycle in the throne room of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud was arranged in an order that would have placed the ruling king on his throne base at the beginning of the royal account, as if to perform it. But even without the action and reaction of author and audiences, the representations and inscriptions on the walls would have constructed a virtual reality that was repetitive, eternal,

and transcendental.

The interplay between image and text is an important issue in this respect, which lies beyond the scope of this essay (see Winter 1981). But it is important to stress that the properties of visual representation greatly expand the field of textual representation. As an example, the city conquest depicted on a single slab from the palace of Tiglath-pileser III at Nimrud (Figure 10.4) may illustrate how detailed representation works through the imagery of Assyrian reliefs, and, furthermore, that many of these details do not have a textual analogy. The city conquest is one of the enduring themes of the Assyrian wars and their written and visual records. This scene, which lacks the figure of the king (although he appears in most of the adjacent scenes), depicts the typical elements of this theme: the fortified city, the heavily armed Assyrian soldiers and war machines that contrast with the unarmed and already defeated enemies, a group of whom are impaled on the city walls. Here again we recognize aspects of hyperrealism: the exaggeration of the Assyrian army in physical proportions and victorious gestures, which exclude any suspicion of failure. The narrative elements largely match the textual record, yet one detail is unique to the visual representation. Three male persons stand on top of the city towers; two stretch their hands in a gesture of submission; the third, in a gesture of desperation, grasps his forehead with one hand. They show what is rarely depicted in ancient Near Eastern art: emotions (see Bonatz 2018). The aim of this particular detail was certainly not to pay artistic attention to the dreadful experiences of those oppressed people who constantly suffered under Assyrian aggression. Rather, it occurred as a narrative element along with this aggression, and thus the figures' emotional reactions became part of the visual narrative. It served to underscore the power of Assyria, the weakness of the defeated in contrast to the strength of the victors, and thus it is a binary representation in a very literal sense.



Figure 10.4 Relief depicting city conquest. Nimrud, Central Palace; reign of

Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE). Gypsum; h. 91 cm.

British Museum ME 115634. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Beyond Assyria: The Luwian and Aramaean Kingdoms

West of Assyria and gradually subdued by its hegemonic claims, the Luwian and Aramaean kingdoms of northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia comprise the only region with a comparably wide range of monumental artistic expressions during the early first millennium BCE. The gates and official buildings of the cities were decorated with carved orthostats; freestanding statues and stelae were placed at charged locations in urban areas and in the sacred landscape. Their visibility differs substantially from the restricted accessibility of Assyrian monumental art, as they were often located in open spaces and were performed through different kinds of public spectacles (Gilibert 2011). Thus in the Luwian-Aramaean world, representation worked through inclusion rather than exclusion.

This observation holds true particularly for representations of deities, which in contrast to the Mesopotamian core area were also displayed in public areas such as city gates, entrances to monumental buildings, orthostat-lined ceremonial ways, and rock reliefs.¹⁴ In addition, there are numerous stelae, most of which represent the storm-god in his various regional manifestations (Aro 2003; Bonatz 2014a: 227–34). Iconographically the stelae mostly stand in a Hittite-Luwian tradition, even in those areas that became the seat of an Aramaean dynasty (Bonatz 2014a: 228–29). With the Assyrian impact on the same areas, however, new iconographic elements mingled with local traditions. As an example, the stele from Arslan Taş (ancient Hadatu) depicts the storm-god striding on a bull and holding the trident-like thunderbolts characteristic of north Syrian iconography (Figure 10.5). Assyrian elements include the god's cylindrical hat crowned by a disk, his long slit robe, and his powerfully defined leg muscles. The stele demonstrates how the storm-god managed to defend his leading position in the Syro-Mesopotamian region in a process of continuous assimilation, but at the same moment it represents Assyrian dominance; it is a religious manifestation in the realm of political representation.



Figure 10.5 Stele with the storm god Adad brandishing thunderbolts. Arslan Taş (ancient Hadatu), corridor S between buildings N and L (temple?). Reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE). Basalt; $1.36 \times 0.54 \times 0.42$ m. Musée du Louvre AO 13092. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

The terms used in relation to statues and stelae are (STELA-) *wa/i-ni-za*, *tasa* and *atari* in Luwian and *nšb/nšb* and (rarely) *zkr* in Aramaic. The inscriptions on two mortuary stelae found in Neirab in northern Syria attest the term *šalmu* (Bonatz 2000: 17, C11; 20, C35). It remains questionable whether *šalmu* or any of these other terms in the Luwian-Aramaean languages had the same meaning as *šalmu* in the Akkadian-Assyrian tradition. Luwian hieroglyphic and Aramaic inscriptions are few and mostly monumental, thus providing less

insight than Assyrian texts into the hermeneutics of language. Nevertheless, since all these terms relate to statues and stelae of either gods or the deceased and ancestors, it seems quite reasonable to assume a synonymous connotation at least in the aspect under which the “image” became the substitute for a deity or a personality, a real thing which manifests presence.

This interpretation is confirmed by the mortuary stele of Katumuwa, found in 2008 during the Oriental Institute’s excavations in Zincirli (ancient Sam’al), whose inscription explicitly states that the “soul” (*nbš*) of the deceased is expected to reside inside the stele (*nšb*) (Pardee 2009: 53–54). The notion of a human soul that outlasts death is already known from the Sam’alean inscription on the statue of the storm-god Hadad, in which the soul of Panamuwa, the inscription’s author, is represented as eating and drinking with the god (Donner and Röllig 1966: no. 214:17, 21–22; see also Niehr 1994, 2014). But the stele of Katumuwa unequivocally declares that the immortal part of a human being preexists in a stone dwelling, the stele/*nšb*, which also presents the image of the deceased (Struble and Herrmann 2009; Bonatz 2014b). The stele’s pictorial representation is essentially the same as for the large series of stelae in the Luwian-Aramaeian world that depict a mortuary repast: the deceased sits in front of an offering table, either alone or with a person standing opposite who presents offerings (Figure 10.6) (Bonatz 2000 for the entire corpus). The visual concept of the latter figure yields another ritually embedded example of self-representation through presentation: the heir of the deceased represents himself paying ritual attention to his father or mother. Although the stele essentially remains the monument devoted to the soul of the deceased, it also functions as affirmation of the duties of the heirs in a reciprocal relationship.¹⁵ Katumuwa’s stele and inscription, however, appear as a single autocratic legacy, commissioned by its owner during his lifetime and equipped with provisions for an eternal life (Pardee 2009). In its mortuary chapel the stele henceforth created the *lieu de mémoire* for the deceased, and it was expected to be performed by regular ritual offerings in front of its image (Herrmann 2014). The soul, which was believed to preexist within the metaphysical realm of such a monument, was linked with the image of the deceased. The question is whether this “image” was perceived as different from the soul, as the figurative commemoration of the deceased, or was the same real thing and thus no longer an image in the strict sense.



Figure 10.6 Funerary stele with banquet scene. Zincirli (ancient Sam'al), outer wall of Hilani I; early seventh century BCE. Basalt; h. 1.50 m.

Vorderasiatisches Museum VA 2995. © bpk/Vorderasiatisches Museum, SMB/Olaf M. Teßmer.

As for the other stelae, which show the praxis of ritual offerings and which thus create a paradoxical space in which the living and the dead physically interact (see [Figure 10.6](#)), and for mortuary and ancestor statues that were intended to receive offerings (Bonatz 2000: 151–55), we are inclined to assume an identity between both “image” and “soul”—the image as the soul’s pictorial evocation. In the Mesopotamian context, Bahrani (2014: 51) poses

the rhetorical question: “must an image be a representation that is separate from the thing that it presents?” Here, in the context of Luwian-Aramaeian mortuary cult, we can answer: no, it need not. The soul is within the stele and it acts through the image on the stele; both are media of the soul’s immortality. Such monuments cannot be regarded as simulacra because they clearly direct their reference toward a single defined personhood. They assure the continuity of this personhood, but this continuity also relies on rituals carried out at the places the stelae were erected. Thus the stele or statue needed its performance; otherwise it would have reverted to the status of unanimated object.

An important aspect of this interpretation is the relatively broad social range of people, both men and women, who could have afforded a mortuary monument. Like Katumuwa, the “servant of King Panamuwa,” not only royalty but also male and female members of the urban elite classes had their stelae; only statues were a prerogative of kings (see further Bonatz 2000: 159–61). In the social landscape of the Luwian-Aramaeian city-states, the political ascent of a nonroyal elite is indeed mirrored in the dramatic increase in mortuary monuments during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE and the circulation of luxury items, such as carved ivories, which reflect its wealth. As in Assyria, the king was the mediator between the gods and the living, but here he gradually also became the catalyst for a hierarchy of nonroyal officials and attendants (Gilibert 2011: 134).

A monumental testimony to the juxtaposition of mutual relationships is the orthostat of Barrakib (ca. 732–711 BCE) from the entrance of Hilani IV in Sam’al (Figure 10.7), where the enthroned king receives a standing person usually termed his “scribe.” But this figuration implies more than a mere scribe in audience with his overlord. The image must in fact represent a high-ranking official who holds the writing implements as regalia of power (Gilibert 2011: 131). The scribe’s role in the mediation of the royal message should not be underestimated.¹⁶ Writing meant the power to record and, in the pseudo-autobiographical discourse of several of the Luwian-Aramaeian textual and visual representations, recording had a discernibly apologetic function (Ishida 1985). The “scribe” of Barrakib, who had the duty and the privilege of recording the royal deeds—comparable to the heirs on the mortuary stelae who record the dead—creates with this act of representation a mental image: the king’s speech, on which follows an indefinite range of culturally embedded connotations.

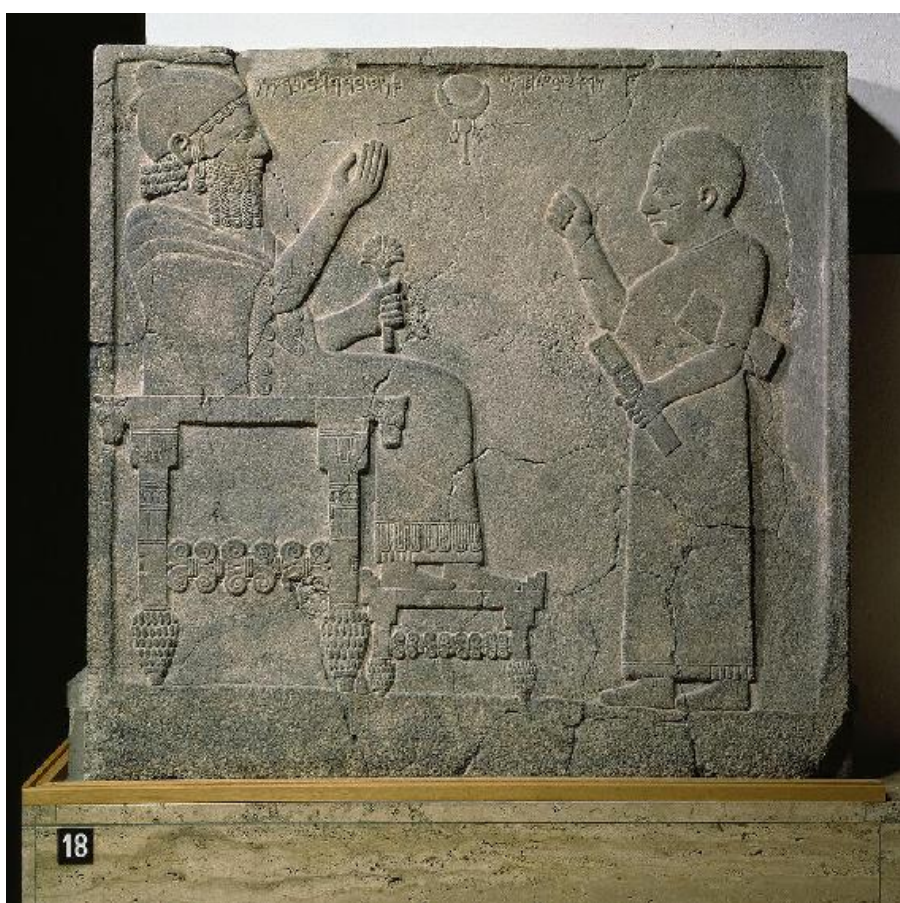


Figure 10.7 Orthostat showing King Barrakib (ca. 732–711 BCE) with scribe. Zincirli (ancient Sam'al), Hilani IV. Basalt; h. 1.15 m.

Vorderasiatisches Museum VA 2817. © bpk/Vorderasiatisches Museum, SMB/Jürgen Liepe.

To repeat the quotation from Stuart Hall (2013: 45) cited at the beginning of this essay: “representation is the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning.” This is exactly what the Barrakib orthostat does: it visualizes language to elicit meanings conceptually that were essential for the self-consciousness of the urban elite. It appears to be an image in the proper sense—it refers and it resembles—but it still alienates and dissociates. With this example, we have manifestly moved away from the concept of the Mesopotamian *šalmu* and notions of simulacra and the hyperreal that we consider characteristic for the Neo-Assyrian world of visual objects. Visual representation in the ancient Near East certainly has overlapping stipulations and conventions, but in the visual praxis it unfolds a multilayered nature, regionally diverse and original.

Conclusions

The ancient Near East offers a rich and relatively well-documented cultural sphere in which to engage with concepts of representation that depart significantly from the Western tradition. The most abundant evidence comes from Mesopotamia, but neighboring regions such as the Hittite realm (see Goedegebuure 2012) and the Luwian-Aramaeian kingdoms indicate regional and cultural differences. The modes of representation closely depend on the ontology of ancient Near Eastern iconic objects, for which contemporary texts and a sophisticated vocabulary also bear witness to a complex belief in the powerful life of things. Statues, reliefs, and other artifacts were not created as mere representations of their referents but were often equated with their referents. They acquired culturally marked agency in order to present things that exist in their own right (compare Winter 2007). The close relationship between representation and reality is rooted in a very old tradition that goes back to the Neolithic. Over the millennia, however, it did not develop in a static and unilinear way. Instead, it went in different directions and transcended spheres that lay beyond human agency. Hence simulacra, simulations, and hyperrealism became the ultimate stages in a self-referential and autopoietic system of representation, at least as far the Neo-Assyrian case is concerned. At the dawn of monotheistic religion, the Jewish theological polemic against the Mesopotamian cult image (Berlejung 1998) was nothing other than a reaction based on disparate grounds, which aimed to deny the cult image's affective properties. Only from a postmodern perspective that dissolves the boundaries of art, image, and representation does the realm of ancient Near Eastern representations become newly discernible, encouraging further discussions.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Fundamental studies include the papers in Heinz and Bonatz 2002, Bahrani 2003, and Bahrani 2014. Irene Winter's numerous contributions address aspects of the subject; see especially Winter 1992, 1997, and 2009. Very useful for any theoretical and empirical approach to this subject is also Fales 2009, an exceptionally rich critical review of interpretations of Neo-Assyrian art. Goedegebuure 2012 offers a thoughtful analysis of different concepts of representation and image in the neighboring Hittite cultural sphere. Berlejung 1998 is the most comprehensive source for reviewing the ontology of Mesopotamian cult images in the light of their Old Testament criticism.

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NOTES

- 1 “etwas Abwesendes zur Präsenz bringen, etwas Unsichtbares sichtbar zu machen” (Göhler 1997: 46).
- 2 Summers 2003 offers a comprehensive inquiry into the main Western history of the problem of representation.
- 3 We also follow Karl Popper’s critique of definitions, which emphasizes that every definition is in principle arbitrary because it is based on agreements. For Popper (1994: 177), all the crucial terms of a theory are thus the undefined fundamental terms (“undefinierte Grundbegriffe”).

- 4 The meaning of “simulate” in this context can be inferred from one of Baudrillard’s (1994: 3) intriguing definitions.
- 5 Bonatz 2002: 17 for references in Akkadian texts, see CAD ş: 78–85. Radner (2005: 23, fig. 1) offers a very useful model of the “Repräsentationsformen eines Individuums” based on ancient Mesopotamian textual sources. For a critical discussion comprising Bahrani’s complex interpretation of the term *şalmu*, see Fales 2009: 254–56.
- 6 Hyperrealism is also what makes Neo-Assyrian art stylistically so distinctive: the hyperreal anatomy of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic bodies, their powerful muscles and sinews, their piercing eyes, the five or six legs of the lamassu figures, etc.
- 7 So it is essentially comparable to the *şalmu*/statue of a god, but it also differs because there is no textual evidence of the *Mīs Pī* (mouth washing) ritual, which was normally used to animate a divine statue (Machinist 2006: 180; *contra* Bahrani 2014: 75). This difference might indeed distinguish the hyperreal of the royal representations from the real of the divine cult images.
- 8 Both Winter (1997: 367–80) and Fales (2009: 261) cite a Nineveh letter (Cole and Machinist 1998: no. 34) that records an extraordinary exchange between the king and his craftsmen about the fashioning of a royal statue. The text proves the king’s active involvement in making his *şalmu* and his concern with the execution of such “minor” details as hands, chin, and hair. It also demonstrates that sculptors were not supposed to alter the canon of a royal representation.
- 9 For example, in Sennacherib’s inscription accompanying the rock relief at Bavian (Grayson and Novotny 2014: 317).
- 10 The stele of Bel-Harran-beli-usur is one of the rare examples in Assyria where such a role was emulated by a subordinate of the Assyrian king, so it could also be regarded as personal statement of autonomy.
- 11 *şalam šarrutīa tamšil bunnannīa* (after Wiseman 1952: 31, 76).
- 12 For references in Assyrian texts, see Bonatz 2002: 15. For the term *tamšilu* in relation to royal representations, see also Westenholz 2000: 110–13 and Ornan 2014: 585–87.
- 13 e.g., in the annals and building inscriptions of Sennacherib (Grayson and Novotny 2012: no. 16, viii 64–73; 2014: no. 43, 101b–106).
- 14 City gates: the statue of the storm-god at the gate of Karatepe (Çambel and Özyar 2003: 138, pls. 218–20); the series of gods represented on the

carved orthostats at the Outer Citadel Gate of Zincirli (Gilibert 2011: 61–67). Entrances: the divine caryatid from the entrance of Kapara’s “temple-palace” in Tell Halaf (Orthmann 2002: 35–40, 65–66, figs. 42–43). Orthostats: the procession of gods at the Long Wall of Sculpture in Carchemish (Gilibert 2011: 31–33, fig. 8). Rock reliefs: the storm-god receiving the adoration of King Warpalawas at Ivriz (Orthmann 1975: 432, pl. XLIII).

- 15 This accords with several funeral inscriptions that confirm that the heir or heirs of the deceased commissioned the monument (e.g., Bonatz 2000: 66, *A 8/Tahtali Pinar*; 69, *Kululu 2*, *Meharde*, *Šeizar*, *Tilsevet*). In the same sense, Panamuwa erected the statue of Hadad in order to provide for his own afterlife (Niehr 1994: 64; Bonatz 2000: 69–70, 146).
- 16 Compare the acknowledged role of scribes as intermediaries in Akkadian royal inscriptions (Eppihimer 2014: 328–29); and the autobiography of Idrimi, king of Alalakh, written on his statue and signed by its real author, the scribe Sharuwa (Dietrich and Loretz 1981: 207).

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Narrative

Paul Collins

Introduction

“Simply put, narrative is the representation of an event or a series of events” (Abbott 2008: 13).¹ It is a universal human phenomenon “carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances” (Barthes [1966] 1982: 251).² The nature of narrative has been the subject of much debate over the last half century and theorists do not entirely agree on how to define it. Most of them assume that an event alone is sufficient, although others have argued that there needs to be a simultaneous and coordinated presence of both action and character (Altman 2008: 12–17). Crucially, it is the way in which a story (the basic linear elements) is told (the discourse) that characterizes narrative. This process is shaped by who is telling the story and why; its structure (for example, it may or may not have a beginning, middle and end); and the intended audience. Narrative discourse is a way of transforming *knowing* a story into *telling* (White 1980: 5). It shapes our lives through the accounts we hear and recount, the texts we read, and the images we observe, ranging from comic strips³ to digital media and live theater; these sources help affirm, build, and transform cultural traditions and identities.

Narrative art may therefore be defined as an account or record of an event told through visual representation. Such images do not simply illustrate or refer to a story; instead, the narrative is carried through the images—that is, understanding the story does not depend on a written text. Yet it is commonplace to assume an intimate relationship between pictorial and written narrative to the extent that we speak of “reading” a visual image. Scholars recognize, however, that the association between the two forms of narrative is imperfect: unlike writers, painters and sculptors do not *tell*, they *show* (Barolsky 2010: 49). Pictorial artists might imply a narrative by referring to what has been said in words, but images are rarely organized systematically like words on a page. Thus, without some knowledge of the story being told—in a process based on matching rather than reading—it is often difficult for the viewer to identify the scene depicted. As both the spatial arts (painting and sculpture) and written texts are generally perceived as having the potential to communicate the same story, however, many art historians have focused on looking for isomorphism between the verbal and

the visual.

Narrative in the Art of Mesopotamia

In Mesopotamian art, compositions often take the form of a culminating scene that stands for the whole of a story. They can be expanded in complexity to include separate moments of the action into a single scene or episodic scenes that juxtapose successive events; all of these approaches can be combined on a single monument (Perkins 1957; Winter 1981; Suter 2013). Both culminating and episodic scenes portray action that has the potential to be “read” and thus fulfill the requirements of pictorial narrative. Although in the ancient Near East it is rare for narrative to be carried solely through the imagery, it is widely accepted that narrative art makes its first appearance in Mesopotamia, specifically with Neo-Assyrian reliefs depicting battle scenes in the period ca. 900–620 BCE.⁴ As Irene J. Winter (1981:12) has made clear, it is their combination of sequence, action, and particularity that distinguishes Assyrian representations of warfare from earlier Near Eastern examples. She argues that such scenes fall into a definition of pictorial narrative—an account or a record of a historical or political event repeated in visual representation—because “comparison with contemporary annalistic texts describing battle established an exact correspondence between battles reported and battles depicted” (Winter 1985: 12–13). Winter took the history of narrative art further into the past when she identified the mid-third millennium BCE “Stele of the Vultures” as “the first monument that could be identified as public, historical, and narrative” (Winter 1985: 13).

Pioneered in this way, a number of scholars have sought “an integrated agenda in the study of political and historical narrative in text and image in the ancient Near Eastern World, through its emphasis on narrativity, and the interdisciplinary—and combined—approach to the integration of the study of narrative in political discourse in both media” (Lumsden 2004: 359). These studies have emphasized the identification of a relationship between text and image as parallel or complementary forms for representing the same event. Over the last two decades, however, a linguistic paradigm has shifted to a visual culture model. As a result, scholars have begun to question whether pictorial narrative necessarily requires a correlation with written sources, thus highlighting the shortcomings of stressing a single characteristic of narrative (Altman 2008: 9–10). Indeed, by privileging the historical content of representations, the role of representation itself is often ignored (Bahrani 2002: 15–16; 2008: 51). In this chapter I suggest that an emphasis on historicity has overshadowed the ritual and legalistic nature of much visual representation in Mesopotamia, and that one of the roles of narrative art was to establish and mediate obligatory and contractual relations between humans

and the gods.

Obligation and Action

To relate a narrative requires the recognition, either through conviction or memory, of an event or a series of events in time and space as well as the characters involved in that action.⁵ For us, events are the result of an automatic and natural progression from action to consequence, of cause and effect generally explained by physical laws and theories. For societies in the ancient Near East, however, the fundamental link between deed and consequence lay in the hands of the gods. The relationship between humans and deities was one of “mutual obligation, with the divinities acting as reliable rulers and the humans acting as obedient servants” (Cohen 2005: 119). Texts from the mid-third millennium BCE, for example the Kesh temple hymns (Black et al. 2004: 325), demonstrate that humans were obliged to provide deities with houses and sustenance: food for the divine table was obtained from dedications and from land controlled by the temple. Jan Assmann (2011) has explored how such obligations had a legal character, established as agreements whereby transgressions would be subject to divine retribution. The focus is therefore on requital, which the ancient sources refer to as justice. “Justice directs the judgment of judges and the actions of kings, it guides people along their different paths, and it links deed to consequence” (Assmann 2011: 209). This legal structure, which Assmann describes as “connective justice” because it binds people together, was guarded and managed by institutions—temple, palace, household—thereby ensuring that good was rewarded and evil punished. Relationships between humans and the gods were established within this framework through ritual acts and imagery.

This obligatory relationship between humans and the gods is apparent in the late fourth millennium BCE with what may be the earliest example of Mesopotamian narrative art: the Uruk (Warka) Vase (Figure 11.1). Divided into a series of registers, the carved imagery is usually “read” from bottom to top as a hierarchic representation of cosmic order which ascends from water that sustains cultivated plants and domesticated animals, through a procession of naked (and thus pure or subservient) men carrying vessels, culminating in the uppermost register where the so-called “priest-king” makes a presentation via an intermediary to the goddess Inana (see Figure 8.2 in Green, this volume) (Winter 2006: 125–29; Suter 2013: 206).⁶ The imagery can be understood as a straightforward historical event—albeit one that is repeated regularly: a ritual celebration of abundance that moves toward the godhead where a presentation takes place. The imagery also suggests movement from outside to inside, that is, from the fertile lands around the city to the temple at its heart. This binary structure of outside/inside is found in later

Mesopotamian pictorial narratives, as discussed below. The decoration around the vessel's circumference conveys through the repetition of forms the infinite nature of the abundance depicted, transforming the scene from temporal to perpetual (Winter 2006). The narrative is in itself circular, since the offering to the goddess at the top of the vase ensures the fertility of plants and animals depicted at the bottom. Thus, the imagery describes an event that has happened and will happen: past and future are linked through circularity, transforming the narrative from a historical event into mythological time.



Figure 11.1 The Uruk Vase. Uruk (modern Warka), Eanna precinct; ca. 3100 BCE. Alabaster; h. 92 cm. Iraq Museum IM 19606. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

The encounter in the vase's upper register is reminiscent of later texts that

describe a meeting between the ruler and the goddess Inana (Jacobsen 1976). Both male and female (the latter perhaps represented in the ritual performance by a priestess) become godhead by virtue of the ritual's performative nature.⁷ All such rituals are performative narratives, theatrical enactments whose effects can be magical transformation or epiphany (Bahrani 2002: 20). This is scripted, repetitive behavior that creates a distinction between the everyday and the extraordinary (Evans 2012: 204). Zainab Bahrani (2002: 21; 2014) identifies repetition as significant in Mesopotamian pictorial narratives, arguing that the images act like the performative ritual statements in incantations that are repeated and built upon to achieve a magical result. The repetition and doubling of forms, especially in the depiction of the vase itself among the objects of the ceremony, creates a referential circle leading to a blurring between reality and representation. Thus the vase not only represents a narrative; it reiterates it via representation in a way similar to the speech act.⁸

Ritual narratives are also represented on carved stone door plaques dedicated in temples by private donors during the first half of the third millennium BCE. Such plaques are typically divided into three horizontal registers. A banquet with seated figures and attendants usually appears in the upper register, which can be interpreted as the culmination of the procession and other activities depicted in the lower registers. Like the imagery of the Uruk Vase, the scenes are ordinarily "read" from bottom to top, that is, from the exterior world of the procession to the interior world of the banquet. The banquet scene should probably be understood as an event situated in the divine realm since, at least on some plaques, the seated figures wear a horned headdress signifying their divine status. In the few inscribed examples, the donor's name is usually placed among the imagery in the lower registers (Evans 2012: 104). Set into temple walls as a locking device for doors, the plaques marked a boundary beyond which the donor, having participated in the rituals outside, probably never passed (Evans 2012: 204). Although the plaques were donated by historical individuals, the imagery they bear is less a record of actual events in which these people were involved than a visual depiction of the profound relationship between unchanging ritual and the divine source of abundance, as represented by the banquet. Such mythological narratives stand in contrast to historical events; they have to be staged to be made actual and are distinguished by their repetition both in reality and through representation, making time into a cycle.

Legal Transactions and Ritual Narratives

While mythological events have to be made actual through ritual and representation, historical events are unique and have to be remembered and

commemorated: they make time linear. Some of the earliest Mesopotamian records intended to preserve a memory of an event into the future concern transactions involving land, property, and people; the text and associated images are inscribed not on perishable clay but in stone. Since many of these objects lack provenance, it is impossible to know whether they were deposited in temples to seek divine protection for the transactions recorded, as suggested for the later Babylonian entitlement monuments (*narûs*).⁹ Among the earliest documents of this type are the so-called Blau Monuments, which appear to form a pair (Figure 11.2). The text on one stone refers to a field, a location, and a person; the other, to a group of commodities (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991: 39–43).¹⁰ Although no event is described in the written text, the figures carved in low relief—some of whom could represent the individuals involved with the transaction—may be engaged in preparations for a ceremonial feast that was part of the agreement process (Wilcke 2007: 64). Of particular significance is the appearance on both stones of a “priest-king” and other figures that parallel those of contemporary glyptic, perhaps suggesting that the Blau Monuments are stone copies of sealed clay documents.¹¹ The imagery points to the ritual nature of the event that is taking place, which provides divine sanction for the transaction (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 195, pls. 46.4, 48.6). It is the intersection of the details of the written text with the ritual action of the visual imagery that effectuates the transaction.



Figure 11.2 Blau Monuments. Provenance unknown; Jemdet Nasr period (ca.

2900 BCE). Green schist; h. 17.9 cm (chisel); w. 16 cm (scraper).

British Museum ME 86260, ME 86261. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

With the advent of the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900 BCE), the “priest-king” no longer appears in visual representations, while elite humans, sometimes named in cuneiform labels, become an increasing focus of imagery relating to ritual and legal acts. The Ushumgal Stele, dating approximately to the Early Dynastic I period (2900–2750 BCE), provides a good example (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991: 43–48; Wilcke 2007: 63–64). Its carved relief depicts the priest Ushumgal and his daughter, equal in size, meeting at the door of a building. The text on the stele records a transaction involving three fields, three houses, and some livestock. Smaller figures, also identified by captions, appear along the sides of the stele and may represent participants in and witnesses to the transaction. Set into the building near the doorway may be the cone or peg (KAG, *sikkatu*) driven into a wall as a ritual act that signified the transfer of property. This relief, therefore, is a culminating scene involving all the characters involved in the action.

The Birth of Historical Narratives

In the Early Dynastic II–III period (ca. 2750–2350 BCE) southern Mesopotamia was divided into a series of polities or city-states, competing for access to resources and influence. During these centuries a visual language was formulated that came to celebrate and represent kingship as the central institution of society (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 214). Text and image now stress that it was the ruler’s obligation to build temples and sustain the gods; he is depicted holding a basket of soil on his head, which acts as a visual signal for the ritual act of forming the first temple brick (Winter 2007: 45–46). Such images could be expanded into narratives. On the stele of Ur-Namma from Ur (ca. 2100 BCE) the work of building a temple, in which the ruler participates, is shown in the lower registers carved in low relief (Canby 2006). The culmination of the process, depicted in the upper registers, takes the form of a ritual performance by Ur-Namma within the completed sanctuary, where the contract between the king and his god is accomplished.

Of particular significance, however, are the scenes of battle and banquet that were adopted and adapted to focus on the ruler. These two motifs of kingship are represented most famously on the Standard of Ur (Hansen 1998: 45–47). The two largest mosaic panels present straightforward narratives of movement from the bottom register to the top, where the largest figure is understood to represent the ruler presiding over a banquet and the execution of war captives. Thus the link between the community (or at least the ruling classes) and the

gods was now centered on a specific individual: human fate and political history become areas of divine intervention. The community, which previously had an obligatory relationship with the gods, now depended on kings who were responsible for administering divine justice and were themselves subject to its laws: the poetic description of the fall of the Akkadian Empire shows what happens when the laws were broken (Cooper 1983a). It was important for a ruler to demonstrate his success in imposing the will of the gods and dispensing their justice by revealing the actions of the guilty and their subsequent punishment. Mythological narrative, with its endless cycle of ritual, faded into the background, while linear historical events came to the fore, helping explain continuity, change, and disaster and thus making the past meaningful and memorable (Assmann 2011: 220).

The earliest surviving monument in which political history takes center stage, but not at the expense of myth and ritual, is the stele of Eannatum of Lagash (ca. 2500 BCE) from Tello, known as the “Stele of the Vultures” (Figure 11.3). Winter’s (1985) comprehensive study of the monument remains a model of analysis, the details of which need no repetition here. But I will summarize some of her conclusions in order to suggest alternative interpretations where they touch on notions of narrative and the role of pictorial representation. The narrative text inscribed on the fragmentary stele records a conflict over territory lying between the neighboring states of Lagash and Umma (Cooper 1983b). It begins with the historical background to the dispute, referencing earlier agreements. The ruler of Umma exploited land belonging to Lagash but failed to make recompense and was thus in breach of the agreements. Eannatum is appointed by the gods as ruler of Lagash and, having received a dream oracle from the god Ningirsu that describes his victory, takes up arms against Umma; despite being wounded, he reestablishes authority over the disputed territory. Twenty burial mounds of the enemy are heaped up and, in the text’s longest section, the defeated ruler of Umma swears on divine “battle nets” to respect territorial boundaries and associated obligations. Winter (1985: 22) suggests that curses aimed at preserving the monument from destruction may have concluded the text on the stele’s lower section that does not survive. The legal nature of the document is clear: it is the gods who establish and guarantee the agreement between the two states, punishing those who break it through their appointed king. Although it is Eannatum who achieves victory against Umma, the text establishes that he owes his triumph to being the instrument of the god Ningirsu. The obverse of the stele shows what has happened (and will happen) should the legal agreement the stele records be broken. The image of the god Ningirsu smites with a mace the head of a captive trapped with others in a battle net. This is not a narrative scene but rather a visual statement of divine justice: “the great battle net that ensnares the enemy,” according to the oaths sworn by Umma’s defeated ruler.

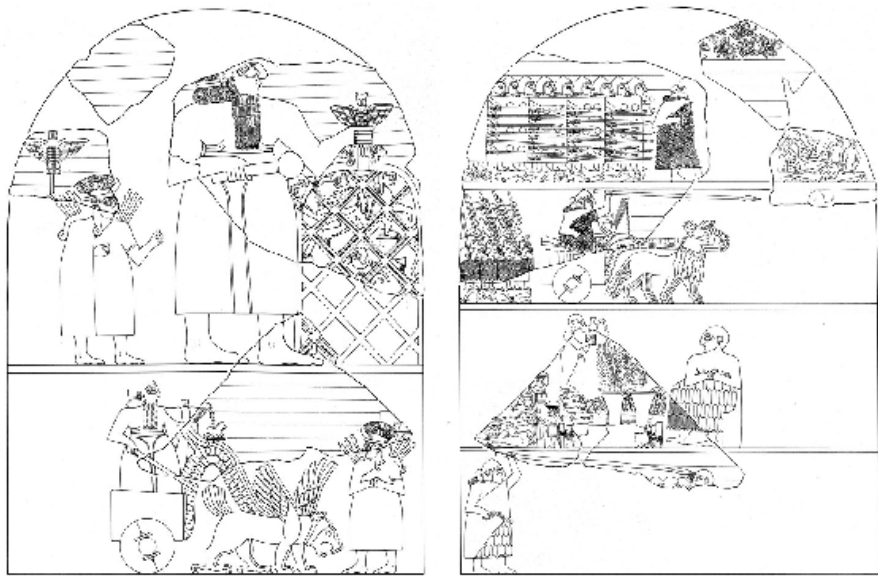


Figure 11.3 “Stele of the Vultures,” reconstruction drawing, obverse and reverse. Tello (ancient Girsu), Early Dynastic III (ca. 2500 BCE). Musée du Louvre AO 16109, AO 50, AO 2346, AO 2348. Drawing by Elizabeth Simpson.

Reproduced by permission of Irene J. Winter.

Following the narrative of the inscribed text, the visual imagery carved on the stele’s reverse face has been generally “read” from top to bottom, with each register apparently containing a coherent and complete action: Eannatum leads his troops on foot and the dead enemies are piled before him (register 1); the battle is brought to a conclusion with a parade of soldiers led by the king in his chariot (register 2); and a celebratory sacrifice takes place before the burial mound of the defeated (register 3). The fourth and lowest surviving register, however, seems to imply that battle resumes—an event not accounted for in the text. For this reason, Winter proposes to reverse the reading from bottom to top as with the monuments already discussed. She suggests that register 4 stands for the preamble of the text, which lays out the conflict’s prior history, or (together with register 3) corresponds to the ruler’s “dream sequence” where the god Ningirsu promises Eannatum victory. This event is then followed by battle (register 2), with the victorious ruler placed at the center of register 1.

A vertical reading of this imagery of battle and sacrifice, either up or down the monument, is contingent on the linear narrative of the text. Since much detail in the written narrative is missing from the pictorial scenes, Winter (1985: 23) concludes that “the literary and visual trajectories meet, but are not yet either truly parallel or identical in structure and content.” But was such a close relationship between the narrative of text and images intended? By

recognizing that Mesopotamian narrative imagery developed out of a visual tradition of representing cyclical ritual and myth, we should not necessarily expect it to function in the same linear fashion as the written text, with its origins in legalistic documents. A solution for understanding the visual images might be found in symmetrical compositions evident in a number of later Mesopotamian royal monuments, where the celebration of divine order, as reestablished by the king, lies at the center of the visual scheme (see below). In such an arrangement, the focus of the Stele of the Vultures would be the images of libation and sacrifice. Indeed, this register is framed by scenes in which the king holds aloft a spear and aims it to the right, perhaps to execute the guilty.¹² The ritual celebration should be understood in parallel with register 1 showing the warrior king: in both scenes the ruler is placed at the center and faces a mound of dead enemies, one a pile of bodies on the battle field, the other a built monument.¹³ These two registers establish a relationship between battle and ritual and can be understood as equivalent to the banquet and war panels of the Standard of Ur. Warfare is presented not only as a divine act that restores order to the world but also as an activity infused with ritual, even a ritual act in its own right, which maintains the essential relationship between the king and the gods. The mythical world echoes the mortal world (on opposite sides of the stele) and integrates the two (Winter 1985: 21).¹⁴

The Cycle of Past and Future

Relations between the southern Mesopotamian city-states and kingdoms were regulated by oaths and contracts held in place by the authority of the gods. As the Stele of the Vultures demonstrates, this circumstance created a need to remember the past in order to make sense of the present and the future.¹⁵ Indeed, in Mesopotamia the past, present, and future were believed to be linked via circularity. Divine intervention in the flow of human activity was expressed through events and, by knowing the past, the science of divination allowed humans to understand signs sent by the gods as a way of determining the future (Bottéro 1992; Rochberg 2004; Annus 2012). During the second millennium, divination became a well-established practice that accompanied every significant action. The legalistic and divinatory requirement to know the past engendered texts describing it to become much more detailed, to look back farther in time, and to construct broader connections. In Egypt around 1300 BCE, for example, when the entire Near East was linked by contractual relationships established by diplomacy, historical narratives begin to be recorded by both ordinary people and kings as evidence of divine intervention in their lives (Assmann 2011: 222). Royal inscriptions transform the events into a report and take their most impressive visual form in the royal battle

reliefs of Dynasties 18 and 19 (ca. 1550–1180 BCE), especially the narrative monuments of Seti I and Ramesses II (Heinz 2001).

It is within this Late Bronze Age setting that we should consider the origin of Assyrian narrative art. The relationship between the king and the gods is apparent in one of the earliest surviving royal images from Assur. A cult pedestal of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE) from the Ishtar Temple is carved with two representations of the king approaching a pedestal similar to the one on which the scene is carved (Figure 11.4). Through the double representation, the monarch proceeding to the right and kneeling before the pedestal, the ritual of worship is performed continuously. The relief is thus a representation—literally, a re-presentation—of the actual act of worship by the king. This continuous narrative, where the action takes place within the same space rather than in separate episodes, is used by the artist to emphasize the unceasing nature of the king's worship: there is nothing visually to disrupt his movement.¹⁶ It is also in the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I that we can date a small, round, black stone lid from the New Palace at Assur. It depicts one of the earliest known versions of an Assyrian royal hero, and it combines a scene of battle and ritual that derives from both contemporary Assyrian and third millennium BCE Mesopotamian imagery (Moortgat 1969: 117–18; Collins 2008: 21–22).¹⁷ The images may have been inspired by the king's plundering of the city of Babylon, an event that was celebrated in royal inscriptions and a lengthy poem: the heightened historical consciousness apparent in the literary works is thereby reflected in the visual arts.



Figure 11.4 Cult pedestal of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE). Qal’at sherqat (ancient Assur). Alabaster; h. 58 cm.

Vorderasiatisches Museum VA 8146. © bpk/Vorderasiatisches Museum, SMB/Jürgen Liepe.

Assyrian Warfare and Ritual

Dating a century or more later, perhaps in the reign of Assurnasirpal I (1049–1031 BCE), the so-called White Obelisk from Nineveh is carved with registers depicting separate vignettes of the king engaged in battle, hunting wild animals, receiving tribute, and undertaking religious rituals.¹⁸ The length of individual narrative scenes within each register expands, moving from a single image on each of the four sides at the top and bottom of the monument toward the two middle registers, where single scenes wrap around the entire pillar. This arrangement has led Holly Pittman (1996) to suggest that the carvings are a reduced copy of imagery, perhaps wall paintings, which originally lined the long walls of a rectangular throne room. Significantly, the longest registers, at the center of the obelisk, depict ritual libations. A cuneiform inscription on two sides of the monument, above the carved scenes, narrates a series of military campaigns “at the command of [the god] Assur,” but there is no clear relationship between the content of the poorly preserved

text and the visual imagery (Reade 1975). A separate inscription labels one of the central ritual images describing a wine libation and sacrifice, however, underlining the importance of this scene.

The throne room reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud unambiguously emphasize the mythological and ritual nature of the king's activities. Here the king is not only accompanied by a god in a winged disk but the deity and ruler adopt an identical pose, so that Assurnasirpal is a mirror of the divine (Figure 11.5).¹⁹ The physical separation of god and king found on the Stele of the Vultures almost dissolves at Nimrud. The narrative elements are distributed over parallel registers running the length of the throne room: the chariots advance to battle; a natural obstacle, a major river, is effortlessly traversed; a city is besieged; and the victorious king returns to his encampment where omens are taken and the defeated enemy is paraded and humiliated. But these events do not occur in a linear sequence. The order established by the king on behalf of the gods, represented by the ritual celebrations and punishment of the guilty, is placed, like the scene of sacrifice on the White Obelisk, at the center of the scheme rather than at the end (Lumsden 2004).



Figure 11.5 Assurnasirpal II returns from a victorious campaign. Nimrud, Northwest Palace (ca. 875–860 BCE). Gypsum; h. 91.44 cm.

British Museum ME 124551. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

For Stephen Lumsden (2004: 370), the centering of the narrative's conclusion is part of a shared literary and visual code, a rhetorical device "characterized by interplay between visual and textual syntactical arrangements." The pictorial representations are thus understood to be informed by writing (and, by association, language). Indeed, the content of Assurnasirpal's throne room reliefs has generally been interpreted as a visual copy of historical texts, especially the so-called Standard Inscription carved across the reliefs in a separate, central register. Although their conclusions differ, both Winter (1983) and Reade (1985: 212–13) have suggested parallels between battle scenes and specific campaigns mentioned in these texts.²⁰ Their studies stress

the role of the viewer, particularly the ability to “read” the historical narrative through the images, which functioned primarily as propaganda (Reade 1979a; 2005: 7; Winter 1981).²¹ While these reliefs must have been effective monuments that intimidated and astonished, however, their primary role was to reveal the Assyrian king’s achievements in restoring the order demanded by the gods. As Reade (2005) has demonstrated, ritual acts comprise a significant element of the content of these narratives. Noteworthy are the scenes of sacrifice and extispicy that are placed in close proximity to the king at the end of the narrative, where the past and future (linked via circularity) was accomplished through the king’s restoring of order (Collins 2014: 626).

The specificity and details of historical narratives (both texts and visual images) expands under Assurnasirpal, which might be explained in the context of the new imperial situation of the ninth century BCE (Winter 1981). The bronze embossed bands that decorated the gates of a palace and temple at the site of Balawat reflect these developments (Curtis and Tallis 2008). The structure of the scenes, captioned with cuneiform inscriptions, can be compared with that of “strip cartoons” (Reade 1979b). Similar bronze bands from the later gates of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) also focus on individual campaigns and expeditions but include even more detail including landscapes and ethnographic information (Schachner 2007; Curtis and Tallis 2008: 11–15). This approach to storytelling is adopted for palace reliefs from the mid-eighth century onward, when linear, historical narratives depicting military violence and its aftermath, set within specific landscapes and accompanied by written captions, become the norm. While the visual accounts of battles and sieges focus on named enemies, perhaps a coalition of states or a single city or tribe, it is often an individual rebel leader who is held accountable for provoking the Assyrian king to violence; such figures are prominently indicated in the visual imagery and named in accompanying texts (Bär 2007: 253; Collins 2014: 631). Since by their rebellious actions enemies had broken divine law, the gods were entitled (through the king) to undertake a just war against them. The palace wall reliefs and paintings thus presented an enduring image of a judgment against an illegal act and its just punishment.

From around 700 BCE, the Assyrian king is no longer depicted engaged in battle but situated instead at the end of narratives and presented as the ultimate source of power, overseeing life and death: he is the gods’ substitute, bringing the narrative to a conclusion. Under Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), entire rooms in the so-called Southwest Palace at Nineveh were devoted to individual military campaigns with a focus on specific moments or a number of episodes that are juxtaposed to express movement in space and time. The reliefs also depict the creation of the palace itself: the quarrying and transport of a colossal sculpture by prisoners of war is told in a series of episodes against a changing landscape. The reliefs thus reference their own creation (Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: pls. 91, 96–126, 414–23). The result is a

representation of a creative act at the empire's center, using resources acquired through the defeat of chaos. Such events can be understood in mythological terms (Noegel 2007) and take their most impressive form in the reliefs of Assurbanipal (668–ca. 630 BCE). In a series of relief panels from the Southwest Palace at Nineveh, the literary *Epic of Gilgamesh* is fused with the historical battle of Til-Tuba (ca. 653 BCE) (Figure 11.6). There are clear parallels between the death of the demon Humbaba in the fifth tablet of the epic and the death of the enemy king Teumman in the reliefs (Bonatz 2004: 100). As Chikako Watanabe (2004) has observed, the designers of the reliefs made full use of continuous narrative to tell the story of the Elamite king's severed head: it travels in a loop across the reliefs while the main battle and other episodes are played out in a linear sequence of images. Continuous narrative is also apparent in Assurbanipal's famous lion hunt reliefs. In a masterful use of space, the designers of the reliefs explored an uninterrupted and unending vision of what was probably a ritual act, the king's destruction of chaos as symbolized by the wild animals (Weissert 1997).



Figure 11.6 Detail, Teumman and his son fall from their chariot and flee during battle of Til-Tuba. Nineveh, Southwest Palace (ca. 653 BCE). Gypsum; h. entire relief 2.04 m.

Conclusion: The Beginning and End of Mesopotamian Narrative

In Mesopotamia the earliest visual narratives were a way of representing, and thus making real, the ritual activities through which obligatory relationships between humans and the gods were maintained. As justice lay in the hands of the gods, human transactions and contracts were validated through rituals (expressed by performance and visual imagery); it was the gods' duty to ensure that these agreements were not forgotten and that violators were punished. With the emergence of kingship, divine justice was mediated through the ruler, who took over the community's obligations to the gods. The narration of events, which reflected intervention by the gods in human affairs, was a way in which kings could demonstrate their success in imposing divine justice. While narrative texts served to establish the actions and logical basis for the event's resolution, the related narrative art transformed this linear history into cyclical myth to ensure that the present led to the divinely ordered world of the past. Such visual images were the medium through which the symbiotic relationship between the king and the god was established and maintained. They took some of their most impressive forms in Neo-Assyrian narrative reliefs of the seventh century. When the great Assyrian palaces at Nineveh fell to invading forces in 612 BCE, some of these carved images of the king and his supporters became the target for calculated mutilation (Bahrani 2004; May 2012).²² This destructive act removed the individuals from history, thereby severing their relationship with the divine and magically destroying the future of the state.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Abbott 2008 provides one of the best introductions to theories of narrative, although the focus is primarily on literature and film; it includes an excellent bibliography and glossary. Herman, Jahn, and Ryan 2005 is an indispensable volume with a comprehensive survey of all the key theoretical issues.

The chapters in Holliday 1993 explore several major monuments of antiquity, although only a few from ancient Mesopotamia, in the context of narrative representation. Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999 usefully discusses the purpose of narration for the ancient viewer. Brilliant 1984, a classic work, addresses the relationship between methods of narration and the ways in which a viewer might perceive the narrative content.

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NOTES

1 Some theorists (e.g., Altman 2008) prefer the term *action* to *event*.

- 2 White (1980: 6) describes narrative as a metacode whereby “transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.”
- 3 Comic strip illustrations are usually combined with written words in order to convey narrative.
- 4 Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951; Frankfort (1954) 1996; Moortgat 1969; Reade 1979a, 1979b; Winter 1981, 1983; Russell 1993; Pittman 1996.
- 5 Halbwachs 1992 has argued that memory, like language, can be both an individual and a social phenomenon. Assmann 2011 has developed these ideas by stressing the cultural dimension of memory.
- 6 While the male figure in the vase’s top register is mostly destroyed, the surviving portion of his net skirt and foot allows him to be identified as the “priest-king” known from contemporary glyptic and sculptures. For a discussion of this figure, see Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 186–96.
- 7 Hansen 1998. Marchesi and Marchetti (2011: 190–93, 212) have argued that the “priest-king” displays features that are more divine than human and conclude that both he and the female facing him in the vase’s top register are deities; this interpretation has been challenged by Suter (2014: 554).
- 8 If ritual events were believed in Mesopotamia to be both repeated and made real through representation, the greatest source of repetitive imagery was the cylinder seal. Some seals of the Late Uruk-Jemdet Nasr periods (ca. 3200–2900 BCE) depict abbreviated versions of the narrative scene on the Uruk Vase reduced to the two protagonists, animals and processions; the vase’s register system may have a direct relationship with such seals and their linear impressions. The agency of the gods was evoked and mediated through the seal imagery and divine authority made effective through the act of sealing.
- 9 Although the Blau Monuments resemble in form and function the entitlement monuments (*narûs*) of the fourteenth through seventh centuries BCE, they are chronologically too distant to be genetically linked (Slanski 2003). Some Early Dynastic stone records of land transactions, however, were deposited in temples. They take the form of inscribed statues depicting a frontal human figure with clasped hands (Evans 2012: 123).
- 10 The date of the Blau Monuments is debated. The content of the carved imagery situates them in the Jemdet Nasr period (3100–2900 BCE), although a lower dating, in Early Dynastic I (2900–2750 BCE), has been proposed on paleographic grounds (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 194 n.38).
- 11 In the Late Uruk-Jemdet Nasr periods, cuneiform tablets were sealed before they were inscribed, the impression presumably providing the clay

- with authority, like a letterhead. Only a few clay tablets were impressed with cylinder seals during the Jemdet Nasr period, after which they were no longer sealed until around 2100 BCE (Pittman 2012: 325–27).
- 12 The soldiers to the rear of Eannatum in register 2 have their weapons raised in march, perhaps suggesting that the object of the king's attention is not the enemy army but rather an individual, as in register 4.
 - 13 Action moves to the right, while the central figure in the scene of sacrifice faces left (judging from the position of his feet on the surviving fragment). I accept Winter's identification of this figure with Eannatum. If a fifth register was restored to the bottom of the stele, it would place the sacrifice literally at the center of the monument.
 - 14 Gebhard J. Selz (2014: 444) interprets the male figure on the obverse of the Stele of the Vultures as Eannatum in the role of the god Ningirsu; he concludes that all Mesopotamian narratives, both visual and written, "were perceived as an actualization of an all-embracing story based in Mesopotamian myths."
 - 15 The Sumerian King List is the most famous Mesopotamian text of the late third-early second millennium BCE that makes reference to a deep past (Jacobsen 1939; Michalowski 1983).
 - 16 The accompanying inscription states that the king's unceasing prayers were repeated daily by Nusku; the god's actions are located in the text, but the king's action is located in the visual image.
 - 17 As with the Stele of the Vultures, the direction of the characters is important. On the stone lid, action moves from left to right in the top register; in the lower register, victory celebrations move from right to left—a reference to the circularity of past and future. Winter (1981: 14) notes the same use of direction in the ninth-century throne room reliefs from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud. On the Til-Tuba reliefs from Nineveh the Elamite king flees to the right, but his severed head is carried in triumph across the field to the left (Watanabe 2004; Collins 2008: 97).
 - 18 Reade 1975 discusses problems of dating the White Obelisk.
 - 19 The deity in the winged disk may be identified as the Assyrian national god Assur, although Shamash, the sun god of justice, is another possibility (Collon 2001: 79–81).
 - 20 For a critique of Winter's conclusions, see Roaf 2008.
 - 21 The reliefs may have been difficult to see (Roaf 2008: 211). But Reade (1979a: 339; 2005) reminds us that they are full of anecdotes and jokes that were meant to be enjoyed.

22 Such iconoclasm is probably related to intellectual currents of the period (Richardson 2012).

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ideology

Beate Pongratz-Leisten

Introduction: Religion and Ideology

In the American academic landscape, where the discipline of archaeology is anchored in anthropology departments, studies of ideology in the ancient Near East—with some notable exceptions—have generally lacked a dialogue between the subdisciplines of material studies, art history, and philology.¹ Assyriological or philological investigations, typically at home in departments of Near Eastern studies, have suffered from a similarly narrow approach. The topic of ideology, however, surely requires an interdisciplinary approach with “the full analytical arsenal available to us—art historical, archaeological, anthropological, and textual—and on its own terms” (Winter 1997: 359). Any artistic, textual, and ritual statement needs to be contextualized within the religious worldview of its time. Moreover, these various modes of expression, far from functioning as independent media, were integral to understanding each other: all contributed alike to the *creation* of reality revolving around the king rather than independently *representing* reality (Bahrani 2003).

The fields of Assyriology, Near Eastern art history, and archaeology have further been dominated by an understanding of religion as “one cultural system among others (politics, economy, literature, art, philosophy, fashion, etc.), all of which enjoy relative independence” (Lincoln 2008: 223), rather than recognizing religion as the metadiscourse that encompasses, orders, and permeates all others—ideology included. In frequently using the term ideology “as a substitute for ‘world view,’ ‘religion’ or ‘political doctrine’” (McGuire and Bernbeck 2011: 166), archaeologists have further missed an opportunity to disentangle the various ways in which ritual, political discourse, and visual media were informed by ideology, which as a subdiscourse had to respond to the religious worldview and myth as a discourse. And, last but not least, ideology has primarily been considered in Marxist terms and thus understood as a strategy deployed by political elites to influence social behavior (Ross 2005: 328), disguise social and economic stratification (Liverani 1979; Pollock 1999: 173), and serve the integration of different social groups—classes, genders, professions, lineages—in power struggles (McGuire and Bernbeck 2011: 174). The concept of ideology has consequently been at risk of being reduced “to an unwieldy dichotomy between domination and resistance, pigeonholing it in its worst two-

dimensional form” (Burke 2006: 128).² The adaptation, refocusing, and selective representation involved in ideological discourse have thus been construed as misrepresentations of events and conditions (Ross 2005: 328), and as fundamentally untrue because of the suppression of certain motives and interests justifying certain societal conditions (Adorno 1956: 168).

Yet both myth and political myths, which inform ideology in ancient and modern societies, have “the cultural status of sacred truth in the societies or groups to which they belong” (Flood 2002: 178). Regarded by their audiences as truthful and meaningful, they represent what Mircea Eliade called *exemplar history*, carrying sufficient authority to have paradigmatic value as “simultaneously a ‘model of’ and a ‘model for’ reality” (quoted in Lincoln 1989: 24; Flood 2002: 179). Antonio Gramsci (1989), among others, suggested that the ruling class rules not only directly “through force and the threat of force, but because their ideas have come to be accepted by the ‘subordinate classes’” (Burke 2004: 25). Giovanni Lanfranchi (2007) has persuasively argued that even the elites of tributary states could staunchly support the Neo-Assyrian Empire, because they enjoyed material benefits stemming from inclusion in the imperial orbit. Consent to Assyrian overlordship was also expressed from within: as representatives of Assyrian princes, local rulers boasted of their alliance with Assyria. Barrakib of Sam’al, in northern Syria, proudly declared having “run at the wheel” of the Assyrian king, following in the footsteps of his father, who had been an ally of the king.³

Rulership has always been sanctified and presented according to a religious worldview, and it is the modern scholar’s task to unveil its truthfulness with regard to the religious metadiscourse and culture of its time. It was only with the disintegration of medieval worldviews and institutions that ideology was turned into an object of political debate and philosophical critique (Stentzler 1993: 212–17).

While recognizing ideology as a central element of cultural discourse, which functions also as an effective source of power (and not only authority) in tandem with economic, political, and military sources (Mann 2012), the fact that in antiquity religion comprised a pervasive element in all of these dimensions means that ideology cannot be understood solely as it is realized in daily practice, regulating and harmonizing social actions (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Eagleton 1994). Instead, as it materializes in state ceremonies, ritual, monuments, architecture, iconography, and all kinds of textual categories (treaties, royal inscriptions, chronicles, and myths) in an “ongoing arena for competition, control of meaning, and the negotiation of power relationships” (DeMarrais, Castillo, and Earle 1996: 16), ideology equally strives to respond to the religious worldview, which ascribes a particular function and meaning to the institution of kingship in the cosmic order. It is precisely the individual king’s perpetual attempt to demonstrate that he has

fulfilled the expectations tied to the royal office that modern scholarship must recognize as the driving motivation shaping the rhetoric of any materialization of ideology, be it textual, iconographic, monumental, or ritual. In this endeavor the ruler was guided by his scholars, who, as increasingly revealed by their libraries from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1600 BCE) onward, represented the hidden voice in creating the king's religiously founded authority (Machinist 2003). While acknowledging the lack of any significant geographically or diachronically unified structure or organization of power in Mesopotamia (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007: 168), with northern Syria and Assyria diverging sharply from their counterparts in Sumer and Babylonia, I would still recognize an overarching ideological *conceptualization* of rulership linking south and north. For the latter, the difference lay in regional choices made from the cultural repertoire of tropes, key metaphors, and images developed beginning in the fourth millennium BCE, and which can be traced through the Early Dynastic period up to the Old Babylonian period in the Tigridian region in particular. The Ninurta theology, which emerged from this area and which shaped the image of the king as warrior in Assyrian royal inscriptions from the Middle Assyrian period onward, is one well-known example for the transmission and adaptation of ideas in the process of a *longue durée* (Pongratz-Leisten forthcoming). Consequently, I advocate the primacy of ideas in driving and molding any form of social action.

Hayim Tadmor (1977) recognized this process already in the 1970s, and it has since dominated his discussion of Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions (1981, 1997). He was followed in this approach by Mario Liverani (1979), whose seminal article on the ideology of the Neo-Assyrian Empire expanded the discussion to consider space, time, diversity of men, and diversity of goods: aspects that he elaborated in his monograph *Prestige and Interest* (1990). Notwithstanding these scholars' important contributions, some Assyriologists have continued to read the Assyrian royal inscriptions primarily to reconstruct an *histoire événementielle* (Mayer 1995), the dynamics of imperial expansion (Lamprichs 1995; Parker 2001; Yamada 2000), and the operational aspect in the exercise of imperial power (Holloway 2002). That the expansionist ambitions of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its artistic and architectural display have been at the center of scholarly interests derives from the fact that, at least in modern scholarship, ideology has been conceived primarily in terms of reinforcing social hierarchies and norms, as well as in economic stratification.⁴

While such social-political aims of ideology in the exercise of power are undeniable, my discussion of how to conceive and perceive ideological discourse in antiquity focuses on its embeddedness within religion. To date, the study of religion and power—the title of recently published conference proceedings (Brisch 2008)—has revolved primarily around the question of the

ruler's deification (Frankfort 1948): that is, whether the king was considered divine or assigned divine status, rather than the various means by which the office of kingship was imbued with a sacred character. The use of the Sumerian qualifier **dingir** in front of the ruler's name, and the depiction of the king with the horned crown that normally signified divinity, were considered the primary indicators of such divine status and have even been considered the extreme in sacralizing the figure of the king (Bernbeck 2008). Rulership, however, has always been subject to practices of sacralization, which became most elaborate in the age of empires (Charpin 2008: 158). In the same conference proceedings, Irene Winter (2008b: 75) pointed to the broader cultural discourse around the institution of kingship by stressing the usefulness of textual sources in "inflecting the readings of royal imagery" as they reveal at least four categories of information: those concerning the origins of the institution of rulership; the criteria for the king's recruitment by the gods; the attributes of the effective ruler; and the signs by which such effectiveness could be recognized. All of these aspects were negotiated in myth, and while the attempt to map historical events onto mythic narratives (Wilcke 1993; Volk 1995; Zgoll 1997: 91–98) is certainly inappropriate (Cooper 2001), myth can at least be read as theoretical reflection on social and political institutions and royal behavior.

It is the notion of the general cultural discourse concerning the *institution of kingship* in contrast to the *individual ruler* exercising kingship that I would like to take as a point of departure for discussing ideology, as the tension between continuity and change did not occur only in periods marked by applying to the king the signifiers of divinity or the hesitation to reify the ruler. Instead, I suggest that in all periods the dialectic lay between the office of kingship as defined by religious tradition and the individual king. The various media reflecting the individual king's interaction with cultural tradition had to be coordinated to communicate the coherent message of the king's effectiveness in performing his office and acting in congruence with the original cosmic plan designed by the gods.

Tradition and Ideology

Creation accounts, attested in many prologues to Sumerian myths and debates, always stated a particular sequence in the process of creation: first the city, then humankind, and, only lastly, the office of kingship. The implicit message is that this institution was created precisely to guarantee the proper functioning of society and its infrastructure, and to cultivate and domesticate nature to ensure provisions for the gods and their temples. "Truly I am the provider" (*lū zāninu anāku*), boasted Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) after a litany of obligations that he met while in office, including renovating the

temples, reinstalling priests and regular offerings, controlling the labor force needed to renovate Marduk's temple Esagila and his ziggurat Etemenanki, returning to their shrines the Babylonian gods who had been kidnapped by the Assyrian and Elamite enemy, rebuilding the city walls, and renewing the remission of debts and exempt status of the citizens of Babylon (Leichty 2011: no. 105). Kingship was thus defined as the necessary and only valid form of political organization (Cancik-Kirschbaum 2007: 176).

It is precisely this narrative of the king as guarantor of civic order and provider for the temples that informs the tradition and cultural discourse. Tradition, as represented in the accumulation, representation, and communication of social values and practices (Eisenstadt and Graubard 1973: 2; Arnason 2005), comprises the body of cultural memory or cultural legacy. Cultural discourse, for its part, is the historical constant of reformulation and reconceptualization, as construed by ancient scholars in mythic narratives (Greenblatt 2005). Royal ideological discourse, while drawing on the images and literary tropes of the cultural repertoire (Dorleijn and Vanstiphout 2003), can be considered a subcategory of the cultural discourse: the condensed form of the royal perspective and achievements that, including all its conceptual innovations, is constantly worked into the traditional framework. Such a nuanced approach, distinguishing between tradition and historical cultural discourse, moves the debate on the conservative nature of Mesopotamian tradition, and on pre-axial and axial civilizations emphasized by S. N. Eisenstadt (1986), in a different direction.

The materialization of ideology in the various media of text, ritual performance, and visual modes of expression implies a sponsor and creator of the discourse, a receptive audience to whom the discourse is directed, and a distinct message that is being communicated. To gain acceptance the producers had to rely on an educated audience that had been socialized in particular cultural representations, as any discourse is neither merely the product of an author who addresses an audience nor the product of the audience itself. Instead, authors and readers engage themselves through the medium of text, image, and ritual performance, jointly comprising a discourse community capable of accepting or rejecting the discursive product (Rafoth 1988). Moreover, the longevity of certain tropes and their widespread distribution reveals that the tradition informing the ideological discourse was widely shared among the ruling elites, who sought acknowledgment of their status (Gunter 2009: 5). In this context it is important to recognize that the scholarly intellectual culture of ancient Mesopotamia safeguarded knowledge over long periods and had from early times created a corpus of images and literary tropes representing the functions and roles of kingship, which underwent little change throughout cuneiform civilization.

The Early Materialization of Tropes Pertaining to Royal Ideology

In Mesopotamia, these dynamics of the emerging cultural discourse become visible with the growth of urbanism in the south, in the city of Uruk during the fourth millennium BCE. The first tokens of an ideological discourse are visible in the archaeological evidence of monumental building, sculpture in the round, and sealings that reflect Uruk's complex society. In written sources, its hierarchical structure and division of labor is further reflected in administrative and lexical texts, which point to a large bureaucratic apparatus dedicated to administering the temple of the goddess Inana (Cooper 2004). To a large degree, Uruk's hierarchical social structure is revealed in the Profession List Lú A. It begins with some kind of leader figure called NAM₂-EŠDA₂, whose composite sign contains the sign ^{giš}ŠITA for weapon and thus could represent either an official with a mace (Glassner 2000: 149, 207–9) or the ruler as shepherd (Selz 2001: 13). The subsequent officials are designated as NAM₂.LAGAR_x (HUB₂), probably an early writing for SAL.HUB₂, a synonym of SUKKAL, “vizier” (Wilcke 2007: 19) and NAM₂.SA₂, perhaps designating a person in charge of dispensing justice. Further illustrating the hierarchical order, throughout the list professions preceded by the sign GAL (“big”) appear before those preceded by SANGA, which designates an administrative function (Wagensonner 2010: 288).

The profession list lacks the EN, however, whose written sign is held by one of the two figures who stand behind Inana in the top register of the Uruk Vase (see Figure 8.2 in Green, this volume). The NAMEŠDA may be the bearded figure wearing a net skirt who appears on various seals and sealings engaged in cultic scenes involving Inana or her sanctuary, in which the goddess is always depicted by the reed bundle that is her symbol (Orthmann 1975: pls. 124a, b; 126 a–c).⁵ As one of the two figures on the pedestals riding on the bull is carrying the EN sign, one could equally argue in favor of the EN, who—while absent from the profession list—is attested in the archaic administrative texts (see also Heimpel 1992: 13). The important point is that, by the time of Uruk III, the texts were already standardized in a common representational format displaying “normative standards for controlling how to be interpreted” (Olson 2004: 232). The high degree of professionalism already discernible at this early stage provided the platform for processing information, and signaled how to refine, elaborate, and systematize concepts and ideas linked with textual and cultural production in general. Once available in written format these texts represented the intellectual resource for a continuous reworking and reinterpreting of texts, values, institutions, and cultural practices (Greenblatt 2005). Although no textual narrative exists from this early period, the cultural discourse on the dynamics of power was fully underway. As the imagery reveals, all the relevant tropes defining the roles and status of the ruler were developed between Uruk IV and the Early

Dynastic period, that is, during the development of the city-state in southern Mesopotamia.

The tropes revolving around an individual leader figure included the following.

The King as Hunter

Depicted on artifacts such as the Late Uruk-period Lion Hunt Stele ([Figure 12.1](#)), the image represented the ruler's confrontation with the lion as the chief predator threatening the life of pastoralists, an icon of civilization's perpetual struggle against chaos. Hunting with the bow or stabbing the lion with the spear, the image encapsulated the risk and danger the king was prepared to take for his subjects. The isolated single combat with the lion was later revived during the Neo-Assyrian period, this time on a much smaller scale: the royal seal. Used by officials in conjunction with state activities, it promulgated royal authority and control (Herbordt [1992](#): pls. 3–36; Winter [2000](#)).



Figure 12.1 Lion Hunt Stele. Uruk, Eanna precinct; ca. 3100 BCE. Basalt; pres. h. 78 cm. Iraq Museum IM 23477. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

The king and lion in the iconic moment of their direct encounter, resulting in the lion's inevitable death at the hands of the king, represents a variation on the theme of hunt and warfare already seen in Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures (see [Figure 11.3](#) in Collins, this volume). On the war side, the king

directs his spear toward his enemy; on the mythological side, Anzu—held firmly by Ningirsu on top of the net containing enemy corpses—is shown already in full submission. Rather than representing narrative action, the entire image qualifies as an icon of victory (Winter 1985, 1986). In textual discourse, the royal hunt emerged only during the Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1500–1000 BCE), when it became paired in the Assyrian annals with the trope of the king as warrior, vividly manifesting the king’s prowess and substantiating his claim to rulership while sharing the vocabulary of battle accounts. In its visual representation, the pairing of hunt and battle occurs in the palace reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) at Nimrud, which show, among other scenes, the dying animal placed beneath a galloping horse (Figure 12.2). The dead animal or enemy trampled beneath a horse or driven over by a chariot, a common image in Neo-Assyrian reliefs, appears as early as the third millennium on the “war side” of the Standard of Ur.



Figure 12.2 Palace relief showing animal beneath galloping horse. Nimrud, Northwest Palace; reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Gypsum; l. 2.23 m.

British Museum ME 124534. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The analogous treatment of human enemy and wild predator, and the pairing of hunt and battle in visual arts and text in the Assyrian ideological discourse, bespeak their cosmic dimensions and vividly depict the king’s role as protector of both civic and cosmic order. Battle scenes (notwithstanding their historical details) and hunting scenes alike were intended to convey the ultimately cosmic responsibilities of the king, as the concluding scene of the hunt, in which the king appears as priest (indicated by his polos) libating over the dead animal in the company of his courtiers, suggests. Locating warfare in the same religious framework, stelae summarizing royal military campaigns show the Assyrian king in a praying gesture with his right hand pointing to the gods (*ubāna tarāṣu*), who are represented by their astral symbols or other emblems. This image of the king fulfilling his duty to achieve victory in the name of the god Assur again encapsulates the cosmic dimensions of his office.

Early visual representations such as Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures, showing on the obverse the warrior god Ningirsu and on the reverse the king in battle, and much later Middle Assyrian inscriptions that use the same epithets for the king and the god, elucidate the king's role in emulating the warrior deity Ningirsu (later, Ninurta) (Maul 1991, 1999; Annus 2002).

The King as Warrior

While archaeological evidence in Mesopotamia attests to far-reaching trade networks, including maritime trade in the Persian Gulf and overland trade with Oman (the main source of copper) and southern Iran (whence most hard stones), obtaining precious raw materials probably did not take place without confrontation. Moreover, a royal ideology that explicitly required the expansion of controlled territory, beginning with the kings of Old Babylonian Eshnunna, intensely promoted the trope of the king as warrior in text, image, and ritual, especially in northern Mesopotamia.

Notably, no pictorial narratives of warfare are preserved from the Uruk period, yet sealings with prisoner scenes show the ruler controlling the life of the subdued enemy (Brandes 1979). Eannatum's Stele of the Vultures introduces a monumental representation of the king in military confrontation with the enemy. The mythological scene showing the warrior god Ningirsu holding a net containing enemy corpses crowned by the lion-eagle Anzu—Ningirsu's counterpart in myth—is juxtaposed with registers depicting the king in battle on the other side of the stele. This combination illustrates the ideological notion dominating warfare in Mesopotamia: with every battle, the king reenacted Ningirsu's cosmic combat against disruptive forces, in the eternal struggle against chaos and disorder.

The battle scenes on Eannatum's stele also introduce motifs that recurred in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs or were explicitly verbalized in Neo-Assyrian military accounts. Among these motifs are the decapitated heads carried away by vultures in the upper register (later complemented by vultures carrying away the entrails of a defeated soldier) and the piling up of enemy corpses. In contrast to the Standard of Ur, on which a combat scene appears on one side and on the other a banquet celebrating the king's victory, the Stele of the Vultures shows a libation scene next to the piles of enemy corpses rather than a banquet. While the libation is not made directly over the dead enemy or animal, as in later Neo-Assyrian iconography, Lagashite ideology seems to anticipate Assyrian ideological discourse in visually indexing the cosmic and cultic implications of war. The banquet scene celebrating the king's victory was only reintroduced by Assurbanipal (668–ca. 630 BCE) at the very end of the Neo-Assyrian period, this time with the enemy's head displayed hanging in a tree (Gilibert 2018) (see [Figure 8.3](#) in Green, this volume).

The iconographic repertoire of war introduced by the Standard of Ur and Eannatum's stele was continued and expanded by the kings of Akkad, who together with their soldiers are shown on their stelae engaged in all possible manner of killing and slaying the enemy (Börker-Klähn 1982: pls. 18–26k). Reworked during the Old Babylonian period in the steles of Dadusha and Shamshi-Adad I, this theme was revived and expanded by the Neo-Assyrian kings in their palace reliefs and in their inscriptions, which dwelt in great detail on the mutilation and physical defeat of the enemy (Marti 2012). The image of the king trampling a named enemy corpse, as on the Stele of Naram-Sin, recurred as an icon of victory throughout Mesopotamian history (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume). Neo-Assyrian royal discourse, which was deeply indebted to the legacy of the kings of Akkad, dwelt at length on the king as warrior. The idea of the *Pax Assyriaca* abounded in endless descriptions of military campaigns and the king's success in incorporating rebellious regions into the realm of Assur's universal kingdom of order. Beginning with Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE), reports on hunting and warfare preceded building accounts: the first were prerequisites for the second.

The theology of the god Ninurta, perpetually battling the disruptive forces that encroached on the civilized world, was absorbed into the theological discourse revolving around Marduk, who rose to the rank of chief Babylonian god at the end of the second millennium. But the trope of the king as warrior, divine or human, did not dominate Babylonian royal ideology in the same way. Instead, emphasis was laid on the trope of the king as provider for the cult—a trope abundantly represented in the imagery, statuary, and texts of the Ur III period and continued in later periods of Babylonian history (Suter 2000; Civil and Zettler 1989). Only with Nabopolassar (625–605 BCE), founder of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty and by his own account “the son of a nobody,” was there apparently a break with the past and borrowing from the ideological legacy of the kings of Akkad (Beaulieu 2003). This change is especially clear from a much more belligerent tone in his inscriptions than one would expect from earlier Sumero-Babylonian tradition. Middle Assyrian and Neo-Assyrian commemorative inscriptions typically organized military accounts in individual sections dedicated to hunting, warfare, and restoration and building activities. Nabonidus (555–539 BCE), the last king of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty, chose instead to combine in one sentence references to military activities as a prerequisite for legitimately restoring particular temples, thus offering a variation on the ideological argument construed originally by the Assyrian kings: “For rebuilding Ehulhul, the temple of Sîn, my lord, who marches at my side, which is in Harran, which Assurbanipal, king of Assyria, son of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, a prince who preceded me, had rebuilt, I mustered my numerous troops from the country of Gaza on the border of Egypt, (near) the Upper Sea on the other side of the Euphrates, to the lower Sea” (Beaulieu 2000: 311). Nabonidus's passage thus appears as a

historicizing version of the last line of the creation epic *Enuma elish*: “How he (Marduk) defeated Tiamat and took kingship.”

The King as Builder of the Temple and Provider for the Cult

While the trope of the ruler as builder of the temple is not yet attested in the Late Uruk period, the Uruk Vase depicts him as guarantor of abundance and prosperity, which were considered to express divine benevolence and acknowledge his success in performing the duties of his office. From bottom to top, its multiple registers depict plants, which grow in the orchards overshadowed by the palm trees, at its very bottom; in the next register, herds grazing in the pastures surrounding the cities; followed in the register above it by people bringing the yields of the fields; and ending in the top register with the ruler encountering the priestess of Inana in front of her temple. It is indeed the only artifact that depicts the king involved in or controlling the activities linked with cultivation and husbandry in a visual narrative.

The motif of abundance (Sumerian **he₂.gal₂**, **he₂.nun**, Akkadian *hegallu*, *nuhšu*, *ṭuhdu*) became a central topos of royal inscriptions and was often linked with the king’s ascension to the throne. In northern Mesopotamia and Syria, which relied on rainfall rather than extensive irrigation systems, it was specifically associated with water for the city’s agricultural subsistence, as the Disk Inscription of Yahdun-Lim of Mari (ca. 1810–ca. 1794 BCE) (Sasson 1990) and inscriptions of Shamshi-Adad I demonstrate. Such references abound in Assyrian royal inscriptions from the Middle Assyrian period onward, but with the Neo-Assyrian kings the focus shifted from the city as a whole to their palaces.

While certainly much richer and more complex in its connotations, the stylized tree, generally referred to as the “Assyrian sacred tree,” can be considered as the central visual token referencing fertility and abundance in Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals and palace reliefs (Parpola 1993; Porter 2003a, 2003b; Seidl and Sallaberger 2005–6) (Figure 12.3). The composite image of the king flanking the tree, above which Assur hovers in the winged disk, as represented behind the throne pedestal in the throne room of Assurnasirpal II (Winter 1983), revealed the perpetual cycle of abundance and prosperity as the product of continuous divine-human communication, but disappeared from palace iconography after Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE). The palmette, along with the pomegranate and rosette, however, continued to appear in repetitive ornamental bands on the walls of Assyrian palaces, “creating an aesthetic of visual abundance” reflecting divine reward with prosperity (Winter 2003: 259).



Figure 12.3 Palace relief, king and sacred tree. Nimrud, Northwest Palace; reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Gypsum; 1.93 m.

British Museum ME 124531. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The legendary king Gilgamesh offered the perfect model for the role of the king as builder. The first lines of the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* introduce him as a ruler who built the walls of Uruk, enclosing acres of orchards and clay pits in addition to the residential quarters (George 2003: 538–39). He did not build the city of Uruk itself, however, since in the Mesopotamian worldview cities originated in mythic times with the gods.

Building inscriptions commemorating the king’s building or renovating of a temple (Frayne 2008), foundation pegs depicting the king carrying the basket for the bricks (Ellis 1968), and plaques showing the ruler performing the same ritual (Figure 12.4) (Boese 1971)—all dating to the Early Dynastic period—celebrate the ruler as sponsor and chief participant in the building ritual, of which extensive descriptions survive only from the first millennium BCE (Ambos 2008). The image of the king carrying the reed basket is confined to the Early Dynastic period, revived only by Assurbanipal on his stele found in Esagila in Babylon (Figure 12.5). This stele, which shows him frontally with the text covering its entire surface, is deliberately archaizing, conceived as a memorial to Sumerian imagery (Bahrani 2007). Gudea’s depiction of himself as architect with the plan of Ningirsu’s temple on his lap remains unique in Near Eastern art (Suter 2000). Likewise unique is his detailed account of receiving in a dream the divine command to build the temple and participating in the building ritual. Despite its highly literary nature—hymnic in character, with a partial mythologizing of the cultic performance—the text provides a valuable insight into the cultic operation and the ideological concepts linked to it (Edzard 1997: CylA and CylB). Reference to divine inspiration and command was integral to ideological rhetoric, since divine approval was needed for anything that involved change and potential deviation from

tradition. Again unique, however, is Gudea's emphasis on knowing "sacred things," that is, the complex nature of ritual performance and its *chaîne opératoire*. References to the building and renovating of temples, and to the provisioning of their cults, abound in royal inscriptions. By contrast, descriptions of the king's actual involvement in the building ritual, with the king making the first "fated brick," placing it in accordance with the ground plan, and performing the pertinent purification rituals, are rare in Mesopotamian literature. Gudea's Building Hymns (Edzard 1997: CylA and CylB) and references in the building inscriptions of Nabonidus (Schaudig 2001) are among the few exceptions.



Figure 12.4 Plaque of Ur-Nanshe. Tello (ancient Girsu); Early Dynastic IIIA (ca. 2550–2400 BCE). Limestone; 39 × 46.5 × 6.5 cm. Musée du Louvre AO 2344.

Photo: Philippe Bernard. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.



Figure 12.5 Stele depicting Assurbanipal with basket of bricks. Babylon, Marduk Temple (Esagila); ca. 668–655 BCE. Marble; h. 36.8 cm.

British Museum 90864. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Similarly, in the Neo-Assyrian period, text and image reflect the king's absolute control over material and human resources and suggest his empire's limitless expanse. Examples include the list in the Banquet Stele of

Assurnasirpal II of exotic woods used in building the palace (Grayson 1991: 288–93), along with the king’s account of constructing large hydraulic works to water the gardens of exotic trees surrounding the palace, and the deportations of people from one end of his conquered territory to the other. Endless tribute scenes decorating the walls of Neo-Assyrian palaces, or city gates as in Balawat (Schachner 2007), conveyed the same message.

The Knowledgeable and Skilled Ruler

Alongside the notion that the ruler had to perform a particular set of functions and roles to fulfill the duties of kingship, we can also attribute the perseverance of tropes pertaining to royal ideology throughout Mesopotamian history to the sense of the royal obligation to adhere to tradition. The rhetoric of the royal inscriptions demonstrates that the kings perpetually sought to negotiate between historical circumstances that inevitably required innovative action and tradition anchored in the mythic past. One effective way to circumvent this problem seems to have been to introduce the trope of the knowledgeable and skillful ruler, who, while partaking in the divine design, resolved any challenge through his insight, perspicacity, and learnedness, provided either by the god Ea or by the patron gods of particular professions. The share in and control of divine knowledge—Sumerian **nam-kù-zu**, “pure, sacred knowledge,” Akkadian *nēmequ*—that “reinforced the sense of loyalty to the established order” (Beaulieu 2007: 3), was primarily pragmatic in nature and considered central to royal ideology (Pongratz-Leisten 1999). It included the cultural knowledge of the king in his role as judge establishing civic order; correct ritual performance and magic knowledge, the origin of which was traced to Ea; further scribal knowledge; and experience gained from life and handed down from legendary figures such as Atrahasis, Gilgamesh, Adapa, Shuruppak, and Ahiqar (Alster 2005: 21; Lenzi 2008). In the Sumero-Babylonian tradition this cultural knowledge was conceived as residing with the mythical kings before the flood, particularly with Ziusudra, as reflected in the Sumerian text *The Instructions of Shuruppak* (Alster 2005: 31–220). Shuruppak’s instructions to his son Ziusudra comprise teachings fundamental to civilized life and include highly pragmatic considerations linked to agriculture, irrigation, and animal husbandry, which—as another Sumerian text, *The Instructions of Ur-Ninurta* (Alster 2005: 221–64) shows—were essential because they ultimately provided for the cult of the gods.

Consequently, civilized life implied a relationship between kingship and the knowledge of how to ensure the continuity of civilization as established by the mythic culture heroes before the flood. To achieve the goal of providing for the gods, the king had to guarantee social order and justice so that civilized life would be maintained, and he did so by drawing on primeval knowledge

conceived in the time before the flood and transmitted over generations down to the present—in other words, by relying on established tradition and conventions. In the list of the ME in the Old Babylonian Sumerian poem *Inana and Enki*, the notion of “stability” and “cosmic order” (expressed by the Sumerian term **níg-gi-na**/Akkadian *kittu*) directly follows the office of kingship and its insignia, and priesthood (Farber-Flügge 1973: 54–55 II v 16). This order indicates the responsibilities that came with the royal office and that were expressed through a properly functioning cult.

The same list, which also includes professional skills and expertise (Farber-Flügge 1973: 56–59 II v 65–vi 2), reveals that pragmatic knowledge was conceived as having been derived ultimately from the gods. The idea that different divinities acted as patrons to different professions, and first-millennium texts such as the *Enmeduranki Legend* and the *Catalogue of Texts and Authors*, for instance, which traced back to the gods various compendia pertaining to professional knowledge, elaborate this understanding. Indeed, the very first line of the latter text combined the magic knowledge of the god Ea with myth revolving around the warrior deity Ningirsu/Ninurta, thus implicitly defining knowledge and strength as the foremost qualities of leadership—a notion that can be traced as far back as the self-laudatory hymns of Shulgi in the Ur III period (ca. 2112–2004 BCE). The idea that skill and expertise, and what the modern mind perceives as human ingenuity, were all derived from the gods rather than rooted in preexisting cognitive capacities, imbued the pragmatic knowledge of rulership with a cultural value and symbolic meaning while simultaneously anchoring it in established tradition.

With the Sargonid kings, and Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) in particular, the notion of skilled crafting (Helms 1993) and “knowledge as an index of royal leadership” (Winter 2008a: 333) became woven into the ideological discourse of abundance and prosperity. While Sennacherib dwelt in his inscriptions on technologies such as hydraulic engineering and metalworking (Reade 1978; Lumsden 2000; Bagg 2000; Ur 2005) and the transport of the colossal protective genii flanking the gates of palaces and cities (Russell 1987), his successor Esarhaddon hints at a royal attempt to usurp the image of expertise that was hitherto the preserve of skilled craftsmen. Esarhaddon and his son Assurbanipal appropriated the domains of prophecy and divination for inscribing their individual biographies into history as a model for future kings (Pongratz-Leisten 2014, 2015). Any reference to skilled crafting and expertise in the royal inscriptions thus was ideologically invested, rendering it a powerful metaphor that highlighted the king’s participation in the cosmic scheme.

Ritual

In addition to the visual media of the arts and architecture and text, supra-regional festivals and state rituals played a central role in visualizing and consolidating the organization of political power, space, and social structures. *Journeys of the Gods*, attested so far only in images and mythic narratives of the Early Dynastic period, reaffirmed and consolidated the supreme position of Enlil of Nippur and his relationship with the patron deities of other Sumerian city-states (Pongratz-Leisten 2006, with bibliography). State rituals, especially the Neo-Assyrian rituals (Menzel 1981; Parpola 2017) and the Babylonian *akītu*-festival (Pongratz-Leisten 1994; Zgoll 2006), illustrate their programmatic message informing and transforming their participants and recipients (Rappaport 1999). The Neo-Assyrian state rituals dwell mainly on the king adopting Ninurta's cosmic role in defending and securing the civilized and cosmic order (Shabatu-Addaru-Nisannu Cycle) by reaffirming his status as ruler through ancestral and divine consent, or aspire to create a unified relational space (*tākultu* banquet) with the blessing of the gods. While during the Shabatu-Addaru-Nisannu Cycle the Assyrian king accompanies the gods of the Assur pantheon during their procession, the focus is on the king's repeated offerings and his moving back and forth between the Old Palace, which housed the tombs of his ancestors, and mainly the Assur temple. The central importance of various days, such as the day he wears Assur's tiara as signifier of his universal kingship under the god's command, is reflected in the reference in the *Chanter's Manual* (Parpola 2017: no. 12).

By contrast, the ritual prescriptions for the Babylonian *akītu*-festival preserved for days two to six of Nisannu (Linssen 2004) bring the king's obligation toward Marduk's cult and the elites of Babylon to the fore, as reflected in various prayers to the gods Marduk and his consort Zarpanitu as well as in the "negative confession." The latter indeed represents a justification report spoken by the king in the presence of Marduk and the high priest, in which he assures the god that he has not touched upon the city walls, Marduk's temple, and the privileges of the Babylonian elites (Pongratz-Leisten 2014: 539–42). The cosmic implications of Marduk's rise to supremacy in the Babylonian pantheon with his victory over Tiamat are anticipated in the recitation of the *Enuma elish* on the fourth day. But only in its second part performed outside the temple with the procession to the *akītu*-house does the ritual's focus shift to celebrating Marduk's triumph over the antagonistic forces and his annually repeated *adventus* to his cultic center in Babylon and to emphasizing the king's role as Marduk's representative (Zgoll 2006). By contrast, at least part of the *akītu*-festival celebrated in the Tashritu focused on the purification and reconciliation of the king with his gods performed during the ritual of the *bīt salā' mē* in a reed hut (Ambos 2013).

Ancient scholars created all of these state festivals for an educated audience capable of identifying the rich allusions to myth conjured specifically by the

king's ritual performance. To the uninformed reader, the prescriptions for Assyrian ritual performance read exactly like instructions for preparing sumptuous offerings. In reality, as the cultic commentaries teach us (Livingstone 1989), the ritual reiterated a sequence of actions blending hunting, warfare, and cosmic battle into a continuum, confronting the forces of chaos to bring them completely under control (Pongratz-Leisten 2012). Unlike Greek drama, this reenactment of the cosmic battle did not operate in a linear narrative. Instead, ritual prescriptive texts or ritual reports and commentary literature chose key moments of action, objects, or songs and words referencing these actions which evoked for the informed viewer and reader the well-known narrative of the combat myth with the warrior king/god at center stage, which belonged to cultural memory.

The narrative discourse attested in myth, royal inscriptions, and other historiographic texts, image, and ritual thus carried an imprint of values and goals conveying an implicit invitation to assent to particular ideological messages and to act in accordance with them. As omen literature and texts such as the *Cuthean Legend* and the *Sin of Sargon* reveal, it was the king who was permanently put to the test to demonstrate whether he conformed to societal expectations and traditional values.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

McGuire and Bernbeck 2011 provide a recent survey of theoretical approaches, with rich bibliography.

With special reference to the ancient Near East, multiple papers in Brisch 2008 address aspects of religion and royal ideology. Seminal contributions devoted to the Neo-Assyrian period include those by Tadmor (1977, 1981, 1997) and Liverani (1979); see now also Pongratz-Leisten 2015, with further bibliography. The works by Reade, Russell, and Winter cited in the references consider material and visual sources for investigating Neo-Assyrian ideology.

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NOTES

- 1 See, among exceptions, works by Z. Bahrani, J. E. Reade, J. M. Russell, and I. J. Winter.
- 2 The author here refers to Miller, Rowlands, and Tilley 1989.
- 3 Lanfranchi 2007: 184. Orthostat of Barrakib from Sam'al (Zincirli): Donner and Röllig 1966: no. 216:8–9; 1968: 233. Statue of Panamuwa II, erected by his son Barrakib, from Sam'al (Zincirli): Donner and Röllig 1966: no. 215:6–7, 10–14; 1968: 223–24.
- 4 See Reade 1979a, 1979b, 1980; Russell 1987, 1991, 1999; Winter 1981, 1983, 1997.
- 5 Charvat (2012: 266) offers this suggestion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ritual

Carolyn Nakamura

Introduction

Indisputably, the ancient Near East marks one of the cardinal geographies for the Western fetishization of myth and ritual, not least due to attention from influential European scholars who became known for their interpretations of these notoriously elusive practices. E. B. Tylor, James G. Frazer, Mircea Eliade, René Girard, and numerous others in the expanded orbit of ritual studies repeatedly turned to the cultures of the ancient (and not-so-ancient) Near East to ground and elucidate various theoretical, and often totalizing, models of ritual and religion. Such attention, no doubt, both emanated from and further engendered an Orientalist view that sees this region and its rich cultural history as “ground zero” for primitive religion and the faulty but enchanting logics of ritual, myth, and magic.

Nineteenth-century Orientalism, in fact, fueled the explorations of the Middle East (see Bohrer 2003) that would provide the materials upon which scholarship on ancient Near Eastern ritual would be based. Following the mid-century decipherment of cuneiform, scholars recognized that thousands of clay tablets from Mesopotamian archives and libraries preserved literary compositions, oracles, magical spells and incantations, divination texts, and texts concerned with temple practices and the institution of kingship. A rich literature around the study of these documents has since developed under the rubric of “ritual,” with materials now recovered from the wider Middle East and in multiple languages, including Akkadian, Sumerian, Hittite, and Aramaic (Haas 2006–8; Sallaberger 2006–8). Ritual has also become a significant orientation in art historical studies. Indeed, a major trajectory in ancient Near Eastern scholarship consists precisely in attempts to interpret representational and archaeological evidence with reference to the abundant textual record documenting rituals of various kinds.

It is clear, however, that despite numerous and persistent critiques of ahistorical theories of ritual—and the blatant cultural chauvinisms that underwrite them—many scholars have ignored a significant complexity of ritual: that it is simultaneously the object interpreted and the method of interpretation. Until quite recently, a dominant disposition of ancient Near Eastern studies has eschewed critical discussions of *ritual*, *magic*, and *myth* as explanatory concepts offered by eminent scholars in sociology and

anthropology (e.g., Goffman 1959; Van Gennep [1909] 1960; Turner 1967, 1969; Bourdieu 1990). Such critiques largely expose ritual to be more of an academic discourse than a universal mode of human behavior. Catherine Bell (1992, 1997) has drawn attention to the circularity or paradox of ritual: that it is differentiated from other social practices, while also appearing as a dimension of all human activity. Ritual has been variously characterized as action, performance, form, quality; as the origin of culture; and as the sacred, and a universal category of social life. How, then, can one categorize something that is simultaneously so totalizing and radically contingent? Bell (1992: 8) concludes that ritual is akin to what the literary critic Fredric Jameson calls an “organizational fiction”: a textual ploy that implies the existence of a problem the study will resolve (Jameson 1981).

And yet, on other registers of experience, ritual is decidedly not a fiction. Rituals make place, create time, embody meaning, and constitute practices that transform peoples and worlds. In this way, they are essential to human sociality. But as various attempts to enumerate and compare ritual practices across time and space reveal, as a universal category of human experience and behavior ritual is neither so easily identified (enclosed) nor defined (disclosed). Initially characterizing religious rites (from Latin *ritus*), the concept of ritual has become increasingly secularized, and now encompasses any “action or series of actions regularly or habitually repeated” (OED: 2a) or “repeated actions or patterns of behavior having significance within a particular social group” (OED: 3). One implication of this evolution of meaning is that the scale of ritual becomes dilated, ranging from individual behaviors to societal or global collectivities. With this move—however productive at some levels—ritual as an analytic category thus begins to approximate an empty signifier, characterizing everything such that it begins to mean nothing (see Goody 1977; Schechner 2003).

In this essay, I attempt to navigate a middle ground between conceptualizations of ritual either too narrow or too broad, and to explore certain productive approaches for examining ancient Near Eastern art and material culture. I review select issues framing the study of ritual in this context and highlight common ground between archaeological and art historical approaches. The second part of this essay then turns to case studies from Neolithic Anatolia and Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia. The former underscores some of the issues, concepts, and approaches that have characterized archaeological approaches to prehistoric ritual. The latter applies these approaches to a group of objects documented through textual, representational, and archaeological evidence in a first-millennium BCE imperial setting.

Disciplining Ritual: Contributions from Anthropology

Until recently, the view that any art prior to the early modern era was either “functional” or “religious” underwrote interpretive approaches to prehistoric and ancient art (see Herva and Ikäheimo 2002). Implicitly adopting a cultural evolutionary scheme, studies of prehistoric media—wall paintings, figurines, rock paintings and carvings, animal installations—have examined art through the lens of magical ritual (Cauvin 2000; Bataille 2005). In contrast, studies devoted to later periods of urban and state formation have tended to examine art as a window onto religious ritual and ideology through representations of royal conquest, accomplishment, and hunting, and cosmic symbolism. Very broadly then, studies of prehistoric art have been oriented primarily toward understanding functional and symbolic meanings, such as matriarchy and shamanism, while studies of art in historical periods have focused on the communicative or expressive meanings of art, such as ideology and propaganda.

From a more anthropological perspective, these approaches, however illuminating, address only a restricted sample of the multidimensional aspects of ritual, explored through numerous studies devoted to its intellectual, emotional, functional, symbolic, structural, cognitive, performative, and embodied aspects (summaries and references in Bell 1997; Verhoeven 2002a, 2002b). Such approaches occupy the rich intersection of three general discourses in the anthropology of ritual: ritual as (1) a critical part of a larger belief system or social institution (Durkheim 1965; Turner 1967, 1969); (2) symbolic and expressive communication (Gluckman 1965; Lévi-Strauss 1969; Douglas 1973); and (3) embodied knowledge and agency (Mauss 1973; Bourdieu 1977). In sometimes radically different ways, these approaches seek either to translate ritual—its social meanings to its formal properties—or to understand the work it does in its particular social contexts to produce power, inequality, identity, and difference.

Building on some of the more productive interventions that have challenged simple dichotomies—between science and religion, ritual and rationality, sacred and secular, for example—scholars have increasingly abandoned characterizations of ritual as a distinct realm of social life somehow removed from rational thought and quotidian practice. Instead, they pursue more nuanced examinations of the ambiguities of rituals and their specific social, material, economic, and political consequences. Rituals not only inhabit religious and cultural idioms; they also underwrite modern configurations of state power (Taussig 1998), science and knowledge practices (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Lynch 1988), corporate culture (Deal and Kennedy 2000), and normalizing regimes—subject-making regimes that determine and regulate what is considered to be “normal” in a society (McWhorter 2004). These

newer studies demonstrate the multivalency of meanings and effects of ritual practice and its relationship to the wider social field. Rather than assuming that ritual inhabits a special, universal category of social experience and behavior, researchers now seek to understand the various ways in which ritual works to destabilize fixed notions and experiences of the ordinary and extraordinary—sometimes heightening differences or resolving inherent contradictions between the two, and sometimes mediating ambivalence, disjuncture, disorientation, and distinction (Blier 2003: 303–4).

Between Art History and Archaeology: Enclosing and Disclosing Ritual

Until the contextual turn, archaeologists all but left the study of magic, ritual, and religion to philology and art history. Indeed, texts, images, and architecture contain linguistic or visual cues that can be used to enclose a field or idiom of “ritual” practice, whereas the material traces of prehistoric and ancient human activities alone rarely do so. Archaeologists must deal with a broader suite of human concerns and behaviors, and those that inform ritual are frequently elusive or invisible. Consequently, there has been a greater motivation and need for archaeologists to engage with developments in anthropology and social theory that seek to question fixed configurations of art, meaning, ritual activity, and the sacred (Fogelin 2007; Berggren and Stutz 2010).

As relative latecomers to the field, social archaeologists (especially those concerned with prehistory) have introduced a critical turn toward examining the category of ritual itself, seeking to consider the everydayness, ambiguity, and efficacy of ritual *beyond* art and language. Certainly, philologists continue to perform the painstaking and highly specialized labor of cataloging, translating, and interpreting ritual texts which reveal political ideologies and atmospheres, cosmogonic worldviews, and conceptions of culture, and divine and supernatural powers, while art historians provide increasingly nuanced analyses of formal, narrative, and symbolic aspects of visual culture and architecture. Yet social archaeologists concerned with prehistory (of the Middle East and elsewhere) must be credited with initiating a kind of intellectual revolution in the study of ancient ritual that has introduced productive discourses on time; space and place; multisensory experience, materiality, and embodiment; memory practices; object agency; human-animal relationships; and everyday practice.¹

Productively, the arenas of prehistoric and historical investigations have moved closer together as they have widened their analytical scopes to include representational (symbolic or expressive) and material, embodied, and

experiential aspects of ritual. The basic identification of ritual in representational scenes, material evidence for cultic practices, and the matching of textual descriptions with archaeological evidence is no longer enough. Instead, multistranded analyses draw upon critical theories of memory, materiality, agency, space, time, embodiment, and experience in order to examine the various processes and contexts of ritual, in its production, circulation, consumption, and even its afterlives.² Ritual thus becomes something that is not simply represented, but is potentially an aspect of the process of representation itself. Recent analyses underscore the importance of ritual in practices ranging from the expression of identity and agency, to the construction of sacred space, memory, and time, to the production of ideology and political power.³ Such studies provide critical, contextually grounded engagements with the abstract and universalizing tendencies of ritual theory—sometimes supporting, sometimes challenging various claims and theories, but almost always revealing important nuances and contingencies.

This fruitful if rare convergence between art history and archaeology (via anthropology) around concepts such as material agency and multisensory experience likely traces some of its roots to a shared turn toward those scholars and critics who explored the more ambivalent and complex character of ritual and its relationship to the “sacred” and “secular.” Such distinguished twentieth-century intellectuals as Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, and Theodor Adorno explored the particular forms and roles of the sacred and secular in modernity, and investigated how they rendered intimately and ambiguously intertwined worldviews and socialities. Art and ritual held a particular fascination for these scholars. Georges Bataille (2005) viewed prehistoric cave art *as* a hunting ritual: here, art was an act of power, a way to influence reality. On a more abstract scale, he astutely observed that regardless of its subject matter art is meant to please and attract, but sometimes paradoxically, through horror and repulsion—thus implicitly suggesting that art yields a distinct kind of agency, beyond representation (Bataille 1949). Considerably more inclined toward modern art, both Adorno (1997: 5) and Benjamin (1936) also explored the critical or revolutionary power of art. Two strands that arguably draw these three theorists into the same orbit are a shared attention to the transformative power of art and ritual, and complex historical imaginings of the sacred.

One insight of this attention concerns art’s capacity to *create* the sacred from its own reality and resources rather than merely to *express* the sacred via ritual; for Adorno and Benjamin, at least, this capacity was distinctly modern. But this facility, I would argue, is rather a potentiality of all art, ancient to contemporary. I am not concerned here with debating the role of art in modernity—whether modern technologies and circumstances offer a radically new opportunity for people to participate in, question, and recreate their own

conditions. I merely want to emphasize that art has never been only in the service of tradition, display, and communication; it has, in fact, always had the potential to *do work*—engage, transform, protect, memorialize—to produce the sacred, as it were. Significantly, this capacity is made possible by art’s close ties to ritual. Examples from prehistory, at least to my mind, provide some of the most compelling demonstrations of this connection.

The Hidden and the Everyday at Çatalhöyük

The eastern mound of Çatalhöyük, in south central Turkey, is one of the best-known Neolithic sites in Anatolia and, indeed, in the entire Middle East. Announced as the oldest known “city” following its exploration in the 1950s by James Mellaart, Çatalhöyük subsequently became famous for its large size (13.6 hectares; 3,500–8,000 inhabitants), lengthy occupation (ca. 7400–6000 BCE, over 1,400 years), and remarkable art and architecture (Mellaart 1967; Hodder 2006). Studies of its figurines, sculptures, and wall paintings gave rise to many interpretations of “religious” and ritual life. Somewhat frustratingly, early publications by Mellaart and others established a remarkably tenacious, if inaccurate, association between the site and ideas of a prehistoric matriarchy and “Mother Goddess” cult (Voigt 2000: 253–54, with bibliography). This association resulted largely from extrapolations of ritual practice based on certain expedient distinctions that prevailed in the late twentieth century: between functional and symbolic, sacred and secular, and natural and cultural practices and orders. Ian Hodder (2006, 2012) has since made the compelling argument that Çatalhöyük was instead a profoundly “entangled” material world that defied such clear distinctions. The matter of ritual thus requires revisiting.

One theme that has emerged from the work of various specialists working on the project since the 1990s is that many quotidian practices were likely ritualized to some extent, while objects commonly associated with cultic practices were used in a more mundane manner. For instance, human and animal figurines—often tiny, unbaked, expediently shaped pieces of clay—were not cultic or venerated objects. Rather, they were used and then disposed of in practices that were likely functional as much as symbolic (Meskell et al. 2008) or metonymic (Nakamura 2010). In contrast, practices related to the inhabitation and maintenance of the house served to fortify both its domestic and symbolic power. Ian Hodder and Craig Cessford (2004: 30) have argued that inhabitants maintained a tidy ordering of domestic space through repetitive bodily practices and ritualized gestures that in some cases were continued over decades and centuries.

The recent excavations and analyses offer very different conceptions and examples of ritual than those famously deployed by Mellaart. Like that of

most archaeologists of his time, Mellaart's interpretive vision was captive to certain preconceived ideas of "cultic" forms, materials, and fixtures. Objects—fleshy and female, no less—fueled the story of the "Mother Goddess" that still casts a long shadow over the site. Mellaart claimed that female figurines occurred in special "cultic" areas or contexts within buildings he designated as "shrines" (Mellaart 1967: 77–130, 180–202). Excavations and analyses carried out since 1993, however, cast these materials and contexts in a significantly different light. Figurines demonstrate a range of forms—anthropomorphic (male and female), zoomorphic, "abbreviated" (truncated human and animal), and phallomorphic (Figure 13.1)—but all occur almost exclusively in secondary contexts: in large middens, between exterior walls, and in building infill (Meskell 2008a; Meskell et al. 2008; Nakamura and Meskell 2009). Moreover, recent excavations of numerous other buildings do not bear out Mellaart's distinction between a "shrine" and a house; instead, the project now understands all buildings as houses with varying degrees of symbolic and ritual elaboration (Hodder 2006: 110). If figurines constitute a form of ritual at Çatalhöyük, then it is not a ritual of "idols" or "Mother Goddesses." Rather, figurines engender a repetitive, possibly quite mundane and ultimately disposable kind of practice (Nakamura 2010: 302–3).



Figure 13.1 Çatalhöyük figurine forms. From left: zoomorphic horns and limbs; anthropomorphic female figure; zoomorphic quadruped; anthropomorphic-phallic figure; abbreviated forms (below, center).

Photos: Jason Quinlan. Courtesy of the Çatalhöyük Research Project.

While repetition can engender a kind of ritualization of the everyday, it can also produce ritual as a form of exceptional attention. Certain actions that mark transitional moments in the life history of a building constitute one of the most provocative practices at the site (Nakamura 2010; Nakamura and Pels 2014). Excavators commonly find deposits of materials marking the construction and/or demolition of a building or feature. There are numerous instances of single or paired objects marking a transitional moment in the life of a house (e.g., 4355 in B.16 and 4205 in B.2), but there are also several cases of mixed deposits that mark and even comprise the constructional

foundation of a house feature (e.g., 4689 in B.16, 4717 in Sp. 181). Certain objects appear repeatedly in such contexts, including animal parts (scapulae, skulls, mandibles, horns, teeth and claws, antler), obsidian projectiles, bone points, ground stone axes, red ochre (pigment), and human skeletal remains or neonate burials (Figure 13.2). Most of these materials possess distinctive physical qualities—color, hardness, sharpness, shape, etc.—or forms that easily condense beliefs, practices, and histories concerning power. In addition to such qualities, objects also accumulate specific life histories or connections to people, events, and locales that can lend historical or biographical power. Indeed, Cessford (2007) noted that many of the objects found in deliberate deposition in the North area had long and complex life histories.



Figure 13.2 Mixed deposit on floor of Building 77, Çatalhöyük: deer antler in front of southwest platform, sealed by building collapse/demolition.

Photo: Jason Quinlan. Courtesy of the Çatalhöyük Research Project.

Such qualities and histories seem especially potent in acts that call attention to the coupling of creative and destructive force in moments of transition: the closure of a bin marked by the scapula tool that formed it; the removal of a timber post associated with the axe that shaped it; or the founding of a new household upon the death of new life (neonate burial). This ritual exchange underscores the radical interdependency of cycles of creation and destruction that could have informed various kinds of social-symbolic labor: it might have performed a final gesture of closure; mitigated acts of destruction or creation, if such acts were regarded as transgressive; or served to fortify and/or contain

power in a specific location. In all of these scenarios, the marking of destruction with symbols (and implements) of creation, and vice versa, suggests that not only buildings but also certain features may have been imbued with some sense of power, agency, or being—if not in themselves, then perhaps as extensions of something else.

A consideration of ritual at Çatalhöyük thus locates the house as a primary subject of ritual action, both everyday and exceptional; it also draws attention to the ways in which ritual produces different forms of agency. Many acts of incorporating materials into the house matrix suggest a distinct kind of empowering or conserving. Obsidian, for instance, occurs at the site in a variety of forms, contexts, and associations. Discrete deposits placed in the make-up layers of two platforms in Building 44 (F.1320 and F.1321) contained mostly finished but unused blades, likely manufactured off-site. In contrast, the foundation layer of a different platform (F.1314) contained what appeared to be gathered and deposited remnants of knapping activities that took place within the building (Carter, Kayacan, and Milić 2005: 199–200). These different actions underscore distinct kinds of agencies. The first example draws attention to the objects themselves: obsidian blades that were perhaps highly valued or even fetishized, given their lack of use and extramural origin. The second example draws attention to a process: activities of knapping and tool creation that may have contributed to the productive power of the household. The difference between the agency of objects and the agency of actions is potentially significant; the obsidian blade deposits could be viewed as a gesture that incorporated potent, “exotic” power into the house, while the obsidian debitage deposit sought to conserve and consolidate the productive power of the house itself (see Nakamura and Pels 2014: 207–12).

New archaeological investigations at Çatalhöyük thus point toward a number of ways in which material and embodied approaches provide new frames for understanding ritual as a practice that instrumentalizes and performs, rather than simply represents, the symbolic. Such approaches, applied in tandem with approaches used by philologists and art historians, stand to deepen and fill out our understanding of ritual practices and how they inform human understandings and experiences of the world.

Neo-Assyrian Apotropaic Figurine Deposits

During the first millennium BCE in northern Mesopotamia, temple and court scholars called *āšipu* (“magician,” “exorcist”), who specialized in the practice of spells and incantations, installed containers with small clay figures and plaques representing mythological beings under the floors of palaces, temples, city walls, and private houses (Figure 13.3). Many of these deposits were left

undisturbed until excavations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unearthed them at important political and religious centers in the heartland of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, including Nimrud, Assur, Nineveh, Tarbisu, Khorsabad, and Ur, when Babylonia was under Assyrian rule. At Nimrud, nearly seventy deposits were unearthed in several palaces and at multiple locations in Fort Shalmaneser. Excavations at Assur yielded nearly a hundred and twenty figurines from thirty-four separate deposits, including examples retrieved from a house belonging to a family of *āšipu* (“Haus des Beschwörungspriesters”) (Figure 13.4). Generally, such deposits comprised one, two, or seven unbaked clay figurines standing “at attention” in brick boxes, facing toward the center of the room. This practice persisted sporadically for almost two hundred and fifty years, from the ninth century until the fall of the empire around 612 BCE (Nakamura 2004, 2005; Feldt 2015; all with previous literature).⁴



Figure 13.3 Clay apotropaic figurines recovered from Neo-Assyrian centers. (a) fish-cloaked *apkallu* figurines. Nimrud or Nineveh; h. 12.7–13.2 cm. (b) bird-*apkallu* figurine. Nimrud; h. 12.3 cm.

British Museum ME 90999, 91837, 91836, 90989. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 13.4 Deposit (capsule 11) containing fourteen fish-cloaked *apkallu* figurines. Assur, “Haus des Beschwörungspriesters.” From C. Preusser, *Die Wohnhäuser in Assur*, Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichung der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft 64 (Berlin: Gebr. Mann, 1954), pl. 28b.

Reproduced with permission of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft.

Unlike many evocative, deliberately hidden finds, the intention behind these deposits was never shrouded in mystery. Texts recovered from Neo-Assyrian urban centers, including Nineveh and Assur, describe multiple rituals involving the deployment of figurines, perhaps most conspicuously in the *Maqlû* (anti-witchcraft) series and texts connected with ghosts and demons (literature in Schwemer 2011; Abusch 2015). Most relevant for these particular finds, however, were ritual texts elaborating the making and consecration of wooden and clay figurines fashioned as mythological beings for burial under the corners, doorways, stairways, and floors of houses (Wiggermann 1992, with bibliography). The best-preserved text in this series explicitly announced the ritual’s aim: to “block the entry of the enemy in someone’s house” (*šēp lemutti ina bīt amēli parāsu*) (Wiggermann 1992: Text I). The same text specified the “enemy” as almost every evil imaginable, from spirits, gods, ancestors, disease, misfortune, Fate, and Death to “anything not good that has no name.” Suitably, then, the texts furnish instructions for the manufacture and installation of numerous figures that provide protection against these myriad evils. Different classes of figures are specified by type and number, with different procedures for their material, fashioning, burial, and activation: “creatures of heaven” made of tamarisk wood; “creatures of Apsu” made of clay, including bird- and fish-*apkallus*, and multiple hybrid

beings (*Mischwesen*) (Figure 13.5). The texts stipulate a series of elaborate ceremonies and acts performed by the *āšipu* or under his supervision, addressing every aspect of manufacture and placement and their precise sequence and timing: location and consecration of resources, invocation of deities (including Ea, Marduk, and Shamash), recitation of incantations, application of colored pastes, inscriptions on figurines, and burial locations.

GUARDIANS

Apotropaic Figure	Appearance	Function	Apotropaic Figure	Appearance	Function
1. FISH-CLOAKED APKALLU			2. BIRD-APKALLU		
Human with fish skin carrying bucket and purifier		To purify	Eagle-headed and winged human carrying bucket and purifier		To purify

DOORKEEPERS

Apotropaic Figure	Appearance	Function	Apotropaic Figure	Appearance	Function	Apotropaic Figure	Appearance	Function
3. KULULLŪ			4. URIDIMMU			5. LAḪMU		
Human head and arms + lower body of fish		To let in good	Human head and torso + lion lower body and tail		To let in good	Human with six curls carrying a spade		To let in good, keep out bad
6. KUSARIKKU			7. BAŠMU			8. UGALLU		
Human head and torso + horns and lower body and tail of a bull		To let in good, keep out bad	Snake with copper axe in mouth		To let in good/keep out bad	Human body + lion head and upright curls (of donkey?) + feet of a bird; one hand raised holding dagger and in other lowered hand, a mace		To keep out bad
9. DOGS			10. GIRTABLU			11. LATARAK		
Dogs bearing five different colors		To keep out bad	Human head and arms + legs and feet of a bird + scorpion tail (winged and unwinged)		Unknown	Human figure in lion's pelt carrying a whip (including head)		Unknown
12. LULAL			13. MUŠHUŠU					
Human with raised fist		Unknown	Snake body + horns + lion's forelegs + bird's hind legs		Unknown			

Figure 13.5 Clay apotropaic figures: Creatures of the Apsu. From *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary*, by

Far from exemplifying popular religion or magic, apotropaic figurine rituals were controlled by the *āšipu*, and by extension, the state. Studies of the apotropaic texts and archaeological evidence have thus far focused primarily on understanding the official nature of the ritual and the position of the iconography in Assyrian state religion.⁵ Much less attention has been given to studying aspects of ritual as a technology of protection (in the sense of *techné*)—that is, ritual in its capacity to *create or perform* protection. Attending to these aspects might illuminate specific practices, embodied expertise, and materialities that produced social power, which in turn could have substantially elaborated the network of beings, institutions, relationships, ideas, histories, and locales that gave apotropaic protection its “teeth,” as it were. Especially with the figurine practice, apotropaic protection can be viewed as a multifaceted technique. On the one hand, it constituted a set of embodied techniques for recollecting a world and enforcing an original, ideal state; on the other, it asserted a sanctioned transgression of this order, and as such, a form of magical agency.

Ritual as Chronotope: the Production of Time, Space, and Being

Stefan Maul (1997: 109) has suggested that a Mesopotamian cultural interest in its own past was omnipresent, largely because “the ideal image of society and the state, the utopia of Mesopotamians, was always located in primeval history, rather than in the future.” Many aspects of political-religious life, therefore, were concerned with striving to reinstate this ideal original order, from the establishment of cities and constant rebuilding of temples to the seasonal celebrations of the New Year’s festival (*akītu*) (Pongratz-Leisten 1994). Social order, cultural achievements, and cities laid claim to the legitimacy of primeval origins, as did the highest offices of kingship and priesthood. It was the king’s duty to undertake reforms that would reestablish the original world order that was increasingly deteriorating over time. The king’s closest circle comprised the court scholars (*ummānu*) whose main activities centered on royal protection. Among these scholars, the *āšipu* carried on the antediluvian sage-tradition of wisdom, advising the king how to maintain the path decreed by the gods in the face of the unattainable glory of the past. Knowledge and wisdom could not be improved upon, only received and transmitted. Scholarship itself thus had an intimate link with the primordial past (Ataç 2010: esp. 150–58).

Notably, mythological events were not fixed in the past, but were repeatable. Such repetitions animated ritual practice, and also effected a suspension of time. Mesopotamian spells and incantations “create[d] magic by harkening back to a primeval time,” writes Alasdair Livingstone (1999: 131). Instead of returning to this primeval ideal—an impossible task given the deleterious drive of linear time—the ritual instead posed a cunning conflation of past with present, thus effectively generating ritual power by obliterating (denying) the passage of time. We might then view the repetition, recollection, and reconstitution of the world in its original “pristine” state as articulating an apotropaic chronotope (Bakhtin 1981)—that is, a particular configuration of time and space materialized through the ritual. As enacted through apotropaic figurine rituals, this chronotope not only reproduced a past divine world order but made this order present, both *materially* and *temporally*; it also provided a localized (spatial) technology for focusing divine power and attention.

Ritual texts reveal that various acts mimic divine acts of creation—for example, the creation of physical being from acts of naming and fashioning form in clay and their subsequent “enlivening” (Wiggermann 1992). The figurines engendered beings understood to reside in the Apsu, the “middle earth” conceptualized as beneath the earth’s surface (Horowitz 1998: 334–47). Placed and concealed under floors, the figurines were thus placed in their appropriate place *under* the surface. In this context, the burial of figurines fashioned as creatures from that underground realm recreated a sacred topography where protective beings were placed in their proper space.

The apotropaic figurine ritual would not have been effective had it not also constituted a more localized topography of protection. The strategic placement of deposits under certain rooms and features identifies perceived areas of vulnerability. Figurine findspots, along with ritual texts, locate corridors, wash- or ablution rooms, courtyards, corners, doorways, and passages as appropriate areas for protection. Mesopotamian incantation texts also describe corners and niches as harbors for demons that use such spaces to hide and to enter and exit houses (Böck 2003: 14). As in-between or transitional spaces, liminal areas are appropriate stations for liminal beings who serve to trap and fight off beings of a similar order: as the defeated enemies of Marduk, apotropaic “monsters” embody a defensive, self-negating power; as extensions of divine will and power, they battle and repel figures of their former selves: malevolent forces that strike indiscriminately and work against divine rule and order.

Yet the figurine ritual was not only about the precise recreation of and adherence to divine order. After all, the very act of creating being and power, which was the remit of the gods, was likely a transgressive one. But such transgressions were obfuscated by certain ritual gestures that exploited not only liminal spaces, but also liminal times. In such liminal states, one can cross borders, act against certain strictures with impunity, and merge ideal

time with real time. This lawless and orderless space is the domain of magic par excellence, since one can “make” or petition for a certain past, present, and future, and transform it into something that is lawful and ordered and just. In the figurine ritual, the consecration and collection of figurine materials and their activation occurs at sunrise—one of two thresholds between night and day—a time associated with Shamash, the divine figure of justice. Apotropaic power, although directed and activated by humans, is ultimately sanctioned by Shamash (Wiggermann 1992: Text I/II). We might then read the strategic positioning of apotropaic deposits in liminal areas not simply as the protection of dangerous space, but perhaps also as the protection of and petitioning for sanctioned transgression—that is, of magical agency itself.

Figuring Protection

Visual and material aspects of apotropaic practice also reveal the tropes of liminality and condoned transgression of divine power. The histories and identities of apotropaic figures engender various mythical and supernatural forms associated with civilization and the protection of humankind (see Figure 13.5). While the *apkallu* figures represent the mythological antediluvian sages who first brought the arts of civilization to humankind, the “defeated enemies” consist of eleven “monsters” bred by the female divinity Tiamat, which became the servants of Marduk (Lambert 2013: 224–32). These monsters provide appropriate figures of protection as the powerful subversives defeated and redirected by divine will and rule. But apotropaic beings take on different attributes depending on the nature of their character. The *apkallus* act as purifiers and exorcists to expel and ward off evil forces, while monsters, lesser deities, and dogs defend the house from demonic intruders (Wiggermann 1992: 96–97). Strikingly, most characters display composite human-animal forms.

Hybrid forms manifest a communion of things generally held to be opposed to or different from each other. The blending of humans and animals in this context may simply present a forceful combination of various desirable traits and capacities. They might also capitalize on the tension between Mesopotamian conceptions of a structured, civilized human world and a chaotic, untamed natural world. Hybrids materialize a unity of self and other, human and animal as an equivocal being that is at once knowable and controllable and unknowable and uncontrollable. As beings in-between, hybrids embody potential, transition, and similarity in difference. As the embodiment of liminality, they are generally associated with dangerous power (for further discussion in the ancient Near Eastern context, see Nakamura 2005, 2008; Wengrow 2014; Feldt 2015: 84–88).

In diminutive form, however, such power could be better directed and

controlled. The miniaturized scale mediates the human enactment of a variety of desires and actions as it invites activities of play and fantasy. In this case, the *āshipu*'s creation of powerful supernatural beings in diminutive, portable clay form mimics the divine creation of being from primordial clay. This transgressive act of appropriating divine creative power is not only mitigated by various suppliant acts (see Wiggermann 1992: Texts I/II) but also finds cover in the opacity of the figurine object itself, which presents itself to the world as a small, doll-like object that invites relations of play and mastery. According to Roger Caillois (2001: 157), play “constitutes an area of ‘limited and provisional perfection,’ in which one is the master of destiny.” In the realm of play, humans are free to “master” any relation, being, reality, or power, immune to any apprehension or consequence regarding their actions; this is especially true when such play is circumscribed by human-object relations. The specific materiality of apotropaic figurines, as miniature, portable, enclosable objects, thus provides an ideal form for channeling protective power in certain locales.

Conclusions

Jonathan Z. Smith (1987: 103) once distilled the essence of ritual into a form of attention: “Ritual is, first and foremost, a mode of paying attention. It is a process for marking interest.” Similarly, Webb Keane (2010: 196) argues that two aspects of experience that likely engender ritual practice are those that are marked for attention and those that seem to direct attention to a significant or potent *absence*—in other words, those presences and absences that have a way of demanding special attention, in contrast to more ordinary experiences and activities. While not all such attractors of special attention produce ritual or religion, Keane suggests that the convergence of experiences of presence and absence produces a sense of otherness that helps make agency into a “more clearly delineated object of experience, reflection and reappropriation” (2010: 198). Agency objectified as such then enables the reflection required to transform habit into inventive, morally responsible, or radically different forms of agency (2010: 187). If we strip away the overdetermined discourses of magic and religion that have become a dominant framework for understanding many ancient cultures and rituals, we might more productively unpack specific actions and assemblages that engage in these various forms of attention. For instance, strategically buried deposits of materials are notable for the ways in which they constitute a kind of “marking” or form of attention that is immediately hidden. This could be one way of producing a “felt absence”—a potent force or entity—made present, yet hidden.

In the Neo-Assyrian context discussed here, this kind of marking characterizes various rituals of state magic and religion that seek to make present various deities in specific locales and materials (e.g., temples, cult statues, and raw materials). Expanding this idea to the scale of landscape, the idea of a sacred topography underwrites the ritual construction of temples, palaces, and cities. From temple foundation to city gate, the urban form expresses a divine plan often enacted through specific ritual procedures. In the sense that these forms of attention (to absence and presence) seek to protect, maintain, and conserve the status quo, one could say that such rituals materialize a form of care. Such care can reproduce tradition, social power, collective memory, wealth, communal consumption, and symbolic capital, but also forms of state violence. In the sense that such attention seeks to subvert or contest a presiding order of things, one could say that ritual becomes a technology of transformative power, potentially unmaking and remaking all of those forms listed above.

Ritual, then, is as much a mode of transformative change as a mode of maintaining tradition and power; and, in most cases, the force of ritual emerges from a subtle tension between these two modes. Significantly, this tension is maintained through embodied, multivalent productions and practices. Not simply derived from a belief or concept, ritual constitutes a particular assembling of culture, time, space, and materiality; it makes and remakes that which often holds groups and societies together, and enables them to change and endure.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Recent conferences addressing ritual across multiple cultural spheres in the ancient Near East, drawing on both texts and archaeological evidence, furnish new perspectives and rich bibliography (Ambos and Verderame [2013](#); Ragavan [2013](#); see also Boda and Novotny [2010](#)).

Gebel, Hermansen, and Jensen [2002](#) provides a review of scholarship on ritual and magic in the Near Eastern Neolithic. Verhoeven [2011a](#) offers a thoughtful introduction to approaching archaeology and ritual. Multiple chapters in Insoll [2011](#), with extensive bibliography, treat both theoretical issues and specific examples drawn from the archaeological and textual record in Anatolia, the Levant, Mesopotamia, and Iran. Ongoing excavations at Çatalhöyük have yielded significant new data and generated innovative analytical approaches. Results are published in multi-author volumes, including Hodder [2010](#), [2014](#). Additional volumes are in preparation.

Recent surveys of the cuneiform literature concerned with ritual and magic, with further references, include Haas [2006–8](#), Sallaberger [2006–8](#), and

Schwemer 2011. Contributions addressing a wide range of issues relating to religion, ritual, and magic in the ancient Near East appear regularly in the monograph series *Ancient Magic and Divination* (Leiden, 2000–) and the *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* (Leiden, 2002–).

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NOTES

- 1 See, for example: time (Bradley 1991; Gosden 1994; Boivin 2000; Lucas 2005); space and place (Gillespie 2000; Bradley 2000); multisensory experience, materiality, and embodiment (Joyce 2005; Meskell 2008a); memory practices (Kuijt 2000, 2008); object agency (Mills and Fergusson 2008; Pollard 2008); human-animal relationships (Goring-Morris 2000; Horwitz and Goring-Morris 2004; Peters and Schmidt 2004; Meskell 2008b; Martin and Meskell 2012); everyday practice (Hodder 1982; Bradley 2003).

- 2 Cohen 2005; Nadali 2013; Ragavan 2013; Wengrow 2014; Ristvet 2015. On the “afterlives” of objects, see esp. Bohrer 2003; Evans 2012.
- 3 Examples include Winter 1992; Bahrani 2008, 2014; Harmanşah 2015.
- 4 Excavations at the Halzi Gate at Nineveh in 1989–90 unearthed a clay foundation box containing figurines (Pickworth 2005: 305–7).
- 5 See Green 1983, 1993–97; Wiggermann 1993–97; Ornan 2004; Ataç 2010; Feldt 2015; Kertai 2015, all with literature.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Agency

Sophy Downes

Introduction

Agency and the agency of (art) objects are currently intellectually fashionable concepts. Human agency—broadly defined as “the human capacity for motivated, reflexive action having some consequence (if not always an expected or intended outcome)” (Steadman and Ross 2010: 1)—has become a fundamental term in sociology and archaeology, a common idea linking a wide variety of perspectives and approaches. And since the publication of Alfred Gell’s polemic *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, with its celebrated formulation that art should be considered “as a system of action intended to change the world, rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (1998: 6), the concept of material agency has staged a small-scale revolution in the archaeological and anthropological worlds.

In studies of ancient Near Eastern art, explicit theorization of agency remains relatively rare. Explanations for this scarcity have been found in the nature of available written sources, in the field’s theoretical isolation, or in its long-established areas of interest—culture histories of agriculture, urbanism, and empires—which emphasize the narratives of “great men” and tend to resist the concern with systems and theoretical models engrained in archaeology (Steadman and Ross 2010: 2; A. Porter 2010: 166–67).

Object agency as a concept has also made limited inroads, despite a rich Near Eastern literature on the social significance of art and its affective qualities, two core aspects of object agency theory. This situation may be attributable to a Cartesian bias in the discipline: a commitment to the distinction between mind and world renders the extension of agency to objects more problematic than for phenomenologically grounded disciplines, where human enmeshment in the fabric of physical existence is uncontroversial (Feldman 2010: 148–49). It may also be due to an established literature on the Mesopotamians’ own strong and well-documented views on the power of objects to exert force on the world. Framed by Mesopotamian belief and practice, these discussions render the current rise of the theoretical concept of object agency less original—and therefore, perhaps, less attractive as an analytical tool in a Near Eastern context than in other fields.

This chapter first sketches Mesopotamian views on the efficacy of objects,

then traces the intellectual history of agency to outline the various models of object agency at play in the contemporary intellectual debate. The striking similarities between the two positions suggest that object agency as a theoretical concept can usefully accommodate and clarify ancient Near Eastern thought and practice. In particular, the congruence of the ancient position with modern object agency theory can be used to compare the Mesopotamian view with other artistic traditions, revealing similarities that might not otherwise be apparent and validating aspects of the ancient approach that initially seem alien to a modern perspective. Finally, I speculate on the converse proposition: Mesopotamian attitudes to works of art can shed light on the current sway of contemporary analytic theory and our own, far from entirely straightforward, relationship with objects.

Object Agency in Mesopotamia

The ancient inhabitants of Mesopotamia clearly considered that objects had the power to do things. One of the most obvious items explicitly intended to exert influence is the amulet or talisman. A wide variety of objects served this purpose, including seals, pendants, figurines, and plaques. These could be worn on the body to avert personal misfortune, or attached to the walls or furniture of a protected place. Ranging from gold necklaces hung with symbols, worn by the Neo-Assyrian kings, to much more humble materials—even heaps of flour or grain, in certain circumstances—many protected against the common dangers of demons or disease. They also safeguarded women in childbirth, or helped with sexual potency or fertility. Objects with amuletic purposes are also found in graves, their power extended to the dead.

Foundation deposits performed a similar function for Mesopotamian buildings. Placed beneath floors, as part of the complex rituals and building practices intended to prevent collapse, such deposits often consisted of groups of figurines. Common examples are fish-garbed figures or anthropomorphic foundation pegs (Figure 14.1). In some periods, apotropaic gate guardians in the form of massive winged bulls or lions protected monumental buildings such as palaces and temples (Figure 14.2). These more visible protectors possessed magical powers in addition to their imposing physical presence. The apotropaic function of these objects is clear from ancient written sources, both the inscriptions found on the objects themselves, and the ritual texts that prescribed their manufacture (Ambos 2010; Verderame 2013). Although practices varied through Mesopotamian history—the account given here is necessarily reductive in this respect—the underlying protective function of such objects was consistent.



Figure 14.1 Foundation peg, inscribed. Tello (ancient Girsu); ca. 2090 BCE. Copper alloy; h. 33.5 cm. The Morgan Library & Museum, AZ145.



Figure 14.2 One of a pair of colossal gate guardians in the form of winged human-headed bulls. Nimrud, Northwest Palace; reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Gypsum; h. 3.50 m.

British Museum ME 118802. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Curse figurines, by contrast, caused harm (for the overlap between witchcraft and anti-witchcraft, see Verderame 2013: 304–6). Fashioned from wood, bitumen, clay, wax, or dough, they were associated with the person to whom harm was intended, usually through a naming ceremony, then ritually

destroyed. The method of their destruction varied according to the material from which they were made and the malevolent intent of the ritual. They could be burnt, pierced, buried, melted, washed downstream, or sent into a desert. Figurines could also exert control in ways that were not exclusively destructive: for instance, to secure a positive response to unreciprocated desire, to promote business, or to fetch runaway slaves.

Other types of objects were vulnerable to this form of transferred damage. Stelae, so-called *kudurrus* (land entitlement documents), and architectural reliefs were all commonly inscribed with curses to protect against the dangers that could arise from their destruction or injury. These curses are detailed, and the possible dangers they deflected are various. The curse recorded on the Great Monolith of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), for instance, includes numerous clauses specifying the types of damage from which it is protected: “(who) destroys this monument (lit. image), discards (it), covers it with oil, buries it in dust, burns it with fire, throws it in water, puts it in the path of beasts or the tracks of animals ... may Asshur, the great lord, the Assyrian god, lord of destinies ... curse his destiny” (Bahrani 2003: 179–80). It also includes prohibitions against the possibility that an attacker might try to avoid the curse by using a proxy to do the damage (Bahrani 2003: 179–80). The possibility of such counterattacks, and the strategic circumventions of the original curse they presume, bear witness to Mesopotamian anxieties about the vulnerability these objects’ existence created—the reverse side of their efficacy and power.

Cult statues possessed particularly strong protective powers. Their presence within a city strengthened it, through the divine favor they ensured; their destruction or loss could therefore have serious consequences. Numerous sources attest to the actual destruction or abduction of cult statues in times of conflict (Richardson 2012 argues that the abduction of cult statues was in fact far more common than their destruction). Perhaps the best-documented example is the abduction of the Babylonian god Marduk, and his eventual return to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar. The king’s account states that he made war on Elam with the specific intention of returning Marduk to his rightful place, demonstrating the significance ascribed to the abduction and recovery of such images as a motivation for warfare. The abduction of cult statues also appears in visual representations: a relief from a palace at Nimrud built in the reign of the Neo-Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE) shows the removal of statues of the gods from a conquered settlement (Figure 14.3).



Figure 14.3 Relief depicting Assyrians removing cult statues. Nimrud, Central Palace, reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE). Gypsum; h. 2.72 m.

British Museum ME 118934. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The practice of abducting images can be seen in the archaeological record. A famous example is the Stele of Naram-Sin, taken to Susa by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte in 1158 BCE, more than a thousand years after its original creation (Figure 14.4). By adding a text in Elamite, relating his own victorious campaign, Shutruk-Nahhunte inverted the power relationship enshrined in the stele, originally a monument to an Akkadian victory over (a region which would later be part of) Elam. The effort involved in moving a heavy stone monument such a distance suggests that the physical possession of the stele was important for control over its powers.



Figure 14.4 Victory Stele of Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BCE). Susa. Limestone; 2 × 1.5 m. Musée du Louvre, AO Sb 4.

Photo: Franck Raux. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

The reuse of the Naram-Sin stele illustrates another characteristic aspect of Mesopotamian interaction with objects: the importance accorded to their past and provenance. The preservation of monuments centuries after their original creation was commonplace (Feldman 2009; Garrison 2012). The search for

the lost sites of earlier buildings and their subsequent excavation and reconstruction is also well attested in the Neo-Babylonian period (Winter 2000a). The reuse and recontextualization of objects exemplified here is a frequent concern of modern theories of object agency, where it is discussed as “object biography,” providing another close connection between Mesopotamian practice and modern agency theory (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 2006: 75).

Examples of mutilated objects also survive: the damage envisaged in protective inscriptions is not abstract, but can be seen in actual attacks. Such acts of destruction most frequently targeted anthropomorphic figures in the round. A common mode of attack was decapitation, as attested by the large number of headless, but otherwise well-preserved, figures. Other mutilations concentrated on facial features: eyes, nose, ears, or mouth. This practice is evident in another famous Akkadian sculpture, a hollow-cast metal head of a ruler, sometimes identified as Sargon (see Figure 26.1 in Emberling and Hanson, this volume). Here the well-preserved surfaces of the sculpture contrast strikingly with the flattened nose, cut beard, severed ears, and traces of violent blows around the missing eyes. This focused destruction followed patterns of physical mutilation known from texts and usually visited upon captured enemies; the disfigurement enacted on the object reflects its treatment as equivalent, in some way, to a human (Nylander 1980).

Systematic defacement of images is visible in the reliefs of the Neo-Assyrian palaces at Nineveh. In one panel from the “Palace without Rival,” showing Sennacherib receiving booty from the siege of Lachish, the king’s face has been gouged out, and his name and the title “king” removed from the epigraph above his head. In the same palace, panels showing Assurbanipal’s defeat of the Elamites have been singled out for attack. In one panel, an Assyrian officer introduces to the Elamites a new ruler, a puppet king of the Assyrians, whose face has been obliterated. In another, a soldier cuts off the head of the real king of the Elamites, Teumman; here, the soldier’s face has been destroyed. These interventions are selective and intentional: the surrounding panels are well preserved and the choice of victims is consistent and politically motivated (Bahrani 1995; B. Porter 2009; for alterations to reliefs without destructive intent, see May 2012a).

This discriminate destruction was not merely propagandistic. These acts of warfare, like the anti-witchcraft rituals enacted through amulets and curse figurines, derived from a world in which it was understood that objects could influence reality in a direct and practical way. Moreover, the efficacy ascribed to talismans or to images of the king was grounded in wider Mesopotamian ontological and causal beliefs.

Ancient Mesopotamian thought posited a close relationship between a person (or divinity) and her or his image. Unlike (post-)classical concepts of representation, an image was understood not as a mimetic copy or depiction

of reality, but as a real entity in its own right. The identities of humans or deities extended to their images, and it was this process of substitution that enabled the image to stand for and act for them. The creation of an image was a method of making the absent present. It was less a technique of representation, in the Western sense, than a method of interfering with reality. Such images were dependent on the individual with whom they were associated, but could act beyond that individual's scope both temporally and geographically. This capacity underlay many uses to which Mesopotamian images were put, as, for instance, the votive statues which from the third millennium onward stood in the temples of the gods, allowing their dedicators constantly to be present in their devotion to the deities and, ideally, for all time.

This approach to images entailed a particular conception of the individual. The self was not single and bounded, but could extend into multiple entities; the self also had a strongly material character, whether it inhered in the body, in clay, or in stone. Instead of the mind/body dichotomy important in Western thought, personhood seems to have been constituted in the corporeal realm. This existence was not uniquely confined to the body, however, but extended beyond it into the assemblage of objects with which it was associated.

Assyrian and Babylonian texts use the word *šalmu* to denote such images (Bahrani 2003: 121–48). A much-discussed term, perhaps better translated as “manifestation” or “simulacrum” than strictly as “image,” *šalmu* refers not to an object type or medium, but to the object as a vehicle for a presence (see Nadali 2012; Bonatz and Heinz, this volume). A *šalmu* was created by a process of substitution, which formed the bond between individual and object. Crucially, this substitution did not depend on a mimetic resemblance between individual and image. Some degree of physical resemblance was not unusual—most votive statues, for instance, are human in form—but the word *šalmu* could also be applied to aniconic objects. Rather than through resemblance, a *šalmu* was linked to an individual through the performance of ritual, including the utterance, and often inscription, of the person's name (for different views on the importance of naming see Bahrani 2003: 204; Radner 2005; B. Porter 2009: 210).

Some statues were additionally deemed to be living beings in their own right. The phenomenon is best known from texts describing the ritual for the consecration of cult statues, the *Mīs Pî*, or “mouth-washing” (Walker and Dick 1999, 2001). Known primarily from first-millennium texts but attested from the third millennium, this ritual removed all trace of human involvement in the statue's creation and brought it to life, endowing it with the senses of smell, taste, and sight. Subsequently the “idol” was treated as animate: it was fed, bathed, clothed, and entertained with music. Images of kings could be given a similar treatment, and seem also to have been conceived of as living beings. Yet Barbara N. Porter (2009: 207–10) argues that even these most

enlivened of statues had limited functions. She notes that there is no suggestion that such statues could, for instance, marry, or lead an army. A *šalmu* was created for a particular purpose or procedure and was not effective beyond that contingency. It was a manifestation of a person or god, but not a full equivalent.

To what extent the process of substitution took place for all objects that a modern Western eye would consider images is debatable. Akkadian distinguishes between *šalmu* and *tamšilu*; the latter is often used to refer to narrative reliefs or to particularly lifelike statues. Perhaps figures such as those depicted in the Nineveh reliefs fell into this category and had not been transformed by the process of substitution. In this case the damage done to them, though clearly related to practices of ritual destruction, might only have the weaker force of symbolic or psychological damage (B. Porter 2009: 210).

Conversely, and again in contravention of modern artistic categories, the process of substitution did not apply only to manufactured objects. The same logic allowed an animal to become a substitute for a person, ritually taking on a human disease, for instance, and dying in her or his place (Verderame 2013: 313–17). Indeed, in one of the most famous (although also rare) instances of substitution, that of the “substitute king ritual,” one person could become a substitute for another. On occasions when omens—an eclipse, for instance—predicted extreme threat to the king, his place was taken by another man, also referred to as *šalmu*, who then suffered whatever unfortunate fate had been destined for the king (Bahrani 2008: 197–201; Verderame 2013: 317–21). From this exceptional example down to the popular use of figurines, the basic process of substitution between person and image extended over a wide spectrum of the population.

This indistinct boundary between reality and representation was present elsewhere in Mesopotamian thought. Through a discussion of scrying, Zainab Bahrani (2003: 127) argues that images were conceived of as real in Mesopotamia because the real itself was considered to be an assemblage of images and signs. She notes that all manner of physical manifestations—moles or discoloration of the skin, the entrails and livers of animals, even visual phenomena witnessed in dreams—could determine, and thus, if correctly deciphered, predict real events. These causal connections, based on an efficacy ascribed to similarity—of physical resemblance or other associations, such as similarities between names as in the Assyrian Dream Book, where “if a man in his dream eats a raven (*arbu*): income (*irbu*) will come in”—could multiply endlessly (Bahrani 2003: 113).

The extent to which this significance-infused world was a constant concern is debatable. Potentially, these connections could govern all aspects of the cosmos. Daniel Schwemer (2011: 420) argues, however, that recourse to ritual was generally due to extraordinary circumstances and that the same intensity of interpretation did not prevail in everyday life. This issue remains up for

debate, just as it is disputable whether all images had some degree of power, or only those for which the substitution ritual had been performed. Nevertheless, the efficacy of objects and images in Mesopotamia was clearly informed by this wider logic of causal connection.

Another conceptual difference lies in the theological beliefs on which the efficacy of Mesopotamian images depended. The ultimate source of power for many objects was divine or demonic. Indeed, the intention to communicate with the divine realm was one of the most consistent aspects of Mesopotamian art. The heightened power and transformative properties of objects in the Mesopotamian world was due not merely to the principle of substitution, but also to the belief in entities with superhuman powers, whose favor could be harnessed. Mesopotamian ontology, as well as causality, lay behind the differences between the Mesopotamian use of objects and our own.

Etic and Emic Descriptions

The types of “magical thinking” fundamental to Mesopotamian art are, at least superficially, at odds with a modern secular understanding of how objects function. We do not ordinarily believe that making a figurine of clay and dissolving it in water can harm someone, or that an amulet will prevent stillbirth. Nor do we believe that a statue can become an animate deity requiring food and clothing.

The Mesopotamian position seems problematic to us for several reasons. First is a contradiction between these beliefs and a commitment to the empirical evidence of post-Enlightenment science, which tells us these objects do not produce the claimed effects. The Mesopotamian view also entails a belief in the existence of gods and culturally specific views on their interaction with humanity. An additional set of problems concerns the blurring in Mesopotamian thought of the boundaries between human and object, categories that we typically view as separate. There are also potential concerns with the status of these objects as art: even rejecting “art” as a monolithic and reified category, the question of how far objects created primarily for their efficacy can be assimilated to Western aesthetic theory is a pressing one.

Nevertheless, the Mesopotamian view cannot simply be dismissed. How objects do things in the world, and how far objects can take on personhood, are two central questions underlying contemporary theories that ascribe agency to art objects. Moreover, these questions are far from resolved in modern scholarship and deeply rooted in multiple ongoing philosophical debates.

Before addressing these issues, it is important to note that the study of ancient

societies, or indeed “other” societies of any sort, necessarily involves a “double hermeneutic” (Feldman 2010: 150). On the one hand, there is the indigenous “emic” perspective, a society’s own views on a subject, which scholarship can aim to describe without necessarily endorsing. On the other, there is the “etic” view, the contemporary analytic interpretation of behavior within a society, an attempt to capture what is “actually” happening. Discussing Mesopotamian practice involves movement between these two perspectives, attempting adequately to describe both Mesopotamian beliefs about objects and the relationship of these beliefs to an external analysis.

Agency Theory

The modern concept of agency is related to the questions of free will, determinism, causality, and the nature of personhood and consciousness, which have been philosophical concerns from Aristotle to the present. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these questions figured prominently in the writings of such political thinkers as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Adam Smith. They envisaged human beings as rational, choice-making individuals—an assumption that underlies modern Western democratic ideology and economic theory. As a modern theoretical term, *agency* derives from the late twentieth-century sociology that grew out of these debates, where it bridges the conceptual gap between individual and society. The question of how interactions between social institutions and self-determining individuals drive social reproduction and social change is a fundamental concern of the social sciences. Early sociology shifted between an emphasis on individual intention—Max Weber’s “methodological individualism”—and determining social structures, for example Émile Durkheim’s “social facts” (Jensen 2012: 48–55). Agency theory integrates these perspectives and moves beyond them by unifying structure and agency in an interdependent, dialectical relationship. More simply put, agency theory holds that individual and society are both valid concepts, and studies the ways—often complex—in which they interact.

Central to the model is the duality of agency and structure. In the form of institutions, habits, and beliefs, structure constrains agency, but is also the means by which an agent is enabled to act. Conversely, agents’ actions are limited by the various structures they inhabit, but their actions serve cumulatively to construct and shape these structures. The two constitute social practice in a recursive relationship and can never fully be separated.

The agent’s intentionality is important in this model, although conceptually more problematic. Different accounts emphasize to different degrees the

extent to which an agent consciously makes choices and the importance of unintended consequences arising from an agent's actions. This distinction is discernible in the accounts of the two major proponents of agency theory, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Anthony Giddens (1979). Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*—broadly, the set of dispositions unconsciously absorbed through upbringing and subsequently through exposure to other social milieux—tends to focus on the constraints exerted on agents and their consequent unwitting reproduction of existing social structures. Giddens's parallel concept of *practical consciousness*, by contrast, accords more potential for actors to understand and change the socio-cultural structures within which they act. Giddens also emphasizes, to a greater extent than Bourdieu, that the results of these choices are not always what the actors intended. Despite these variations, nearly all models of social agency broadly recognize some degree of intentionality.

The term *agency* is notoriously labile (Dobres and Robb 2000: 8). Its ubiquity in the social sciences gives an almost unprecedented degree of common theoretical ground, but it has been argued that its meaning is generalized to the point of analytical uselessness; its uncritical application is sometimes parodied as “add actors and stir” (Dobres and Robb 2000: 13). There is a basic consensus that, over and above “some sort of doing,” agency implies socially significant action, with some degree of intentionality, taking place within a simultaneously constraining and enabling structure (Dobres and Robb 2000: 8). Nevertheless, what work the term is doing can vary considerably from one context to another.

Although the model of agency is still relatively little used in ancient Near Eastern scholarship, its possibilities have increasingly been noted. A recent volume, *Agency and Identity in the Ancient Near East*, applies the concept in various contexts and scales, from Neolithic Çatalhöyük households to the Neo-Assyrian and Hittite Empires (Steadman and Ross 2010). Of particular interest is agency theory's capacity to extend discussion beyond kings and elites to the concerns of subgroups and the choices of individuals. This characteristic agentive shift from broad-scale analysis to empathetic, human-oriented responses provides a richer model of the frameworks of power—made up of multiple small acts throughout society—within which even kings operate. Skepticism remains about whether agency is a useful tool or a theoretical bandwagon, but it has the potential to reinvigorate the ancient Near Eastern discussion.

Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*

To ascribe (some form of) agency to a person is uncontentious; to ascribe it to an object is more problematic. The scholarly work that most dramatically

promotes this position—for art objects—and from which the direct application of the term *agency* to works of art derives, is Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998). Gell is not the only recent author to discuss object agency, but he is the most influential, and his position is useful for our purposes in that it is particularly close to the Mesopotamian view. Here I briefly describe Gell’s position and use his work as a starting point for exploring object agency more widely in the scholarly literature.

Gell’s basic proposition is that art should *not* be considered in terms of meaning or aesthetics, but instead as a way of mediating and enacting social relationships. He models art objects as participants in social systems; his concern is with the intentions and transformations materialized through their production and circulation within these systems. Art objects are devices “for securing the acquiescence of individuals in the network of intentionalities in which they are enmeshed” (Gell 1992: 43). Gell is not at all concerned with the symbolic meaning of art, rejecting “the slightest imputation that (visual) art is ‘like language’” (1998: 14). Nor is he primarily concerned with aesthetic appreciation; the stylistic qualities of art works are relevant, but *only* in so far as they are mobilized in the course of social interaction. The theory of art becomes the theory of “social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency” (1998: 7).

Gell develops a specific conceptual framework within which to explore these ideas, and with it a particular terminology. *Art-like situations* consist of interactions between four different types of entity—*index*, *artist*, *recipient*, and *prototype*—related to each other in a variety of agent/patient relationships through a cognitive operation that he terms *the abduction of agency*. Abduction of agency is a form of inference in which one social being abducts (infers) the agency of another through a material index (the art object). A typically Gellian example involves the patterned canoe prows used by inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands, an archipelago of Papua New Guinea: enemies see these highly decorated prows and, abducting the social agency (that is, power) of the islanders, are terrified. Gell describes a set of possible relationships, illustrated diagrammatically as the art nexus (Figure 14.5), which are further expanded in what Whitney Davis (2007: 202) terms *gellograms* to describe a variety of complex, and sometimes recursive, patterns of agency abduction.

		AGENT			
		Artist	Index	Prototype	Recipient
P A T I E N T	Artist	Artist as source of creative act Artist as witness to act of creation	Material inherently dictates to artist the form it assumes	Prototype controls artist's action, appearance of prototype imitated by artist. Realistic art.	Recipient cause of artist's action (as patron)
	Index	Material stuff shaped by artist's agency and intention	Index as cause of itself: 'self-made' Index as a 'made thing'	Prototype dictates the form taken by index	Recipient the cause of the origination and form taken by the index
	Prototype	Appearance of prototype dictated by artist. Imaginative art.	Image or actions of prototype controlled by means of index, a locus of power over prototype	Prototype as cause of index Prototype affected by index	Recipient has power over the prototype. Voodoo sorcery.
	Recipient	Recipient's response dictated by artist's skill, wit, magical powers, etc. Recipient captivated.	Index source of power over recipient. Recipient as 'spectator' submits to index.	Prototype has power over the recipient. Image of prototype used to control actions of recipient. Idolatry.	Recipient as patron Recipient as spectator

Figure 14.5 The Art Nexus. From A. Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 29, table 1 (adapted by Mel Keiser). By permission of Oxford University Press.

Approaches to Art

Polemical though Gell’s account is, various trends and ideas in art history were precursors to it and explain why it has emerged as persuasive. Here we consider the intellectual background to object agency, how the social, symbolic, and aesthetic aspects of art have been discussed in recent scholarship, and how these scholarly trends have affected studies of ancient Near Eastern art.

Art’s social role and social impact are mainstream intellectual ideas. Throughout the twentieth century, art has been modeled as closely related to society, in contrast to the earlier prevailing Kantian view of aesthetics as “disinterested pleasure.” Moreover, within such discussions lies a strong conception of art as oppositional to society rather than congruent with it, to which agency theory, with its focus on individual acts, is sympathetic

(Hoskins 2006: 74). With the rise of cultural history, the view of art as primarily reflective of society, and in particular the influential Marxist account of art as part of the epiphenomenal superstructure—serving an economic base—has been rejected in favor of a recursive view of art and society: art is integrated with social life and a constituent of it. This notion is consonant with Gell's view that art objects are key participants in social action and oriented toward social consequences.

In an ancient Near Eastern context, this conceptual development took the form of a shift away from the religious and formal aspects of art toward discussion of the ideology of kingship, and the ways in which objects and architecture promote such ideologies to maintain royal power. This emphasis on kingship, determined in part by the nature of the surviving material, contrasts with mainstream cultural history, which usually has an interest in popular, or demotic, culture. Nevertheless, there is a parallel development in the focus on the *roles* of art objects within political, economic, and ideological systems. Studies of ancient Near Eastern art increasingly approach objects as key participants in social action. And, more recently, interest in objects in non-elite Near Eastern contexts—notably as agents in the formation of identities and participants in the production stages known as *chaîne opératoire*—has increased (Steadman and Ross 2010: 6).

Gell's opposition of agency to symbolic models of art is more radical, but it is not without parallels, notably in the scholarly reaction against the linguistic-symbolic models of structuralist anthropology. Gell's use of the term *index*, for example, derives from Charles Sanders Peirce's categorization of three types of sign—index, icon, and symbol. Gell rejects the symbol—i.e., the purely conventional signifier—as an appropriate model for art objects, emphasizing instead the index—a causal signifier: smoke, for instance, is an index of fire—and, to a lesser extent the icon, which has a degree of natural relationship to the signified, for instance a physical resemblance or an onomatopoeic similarity.

The extent to which art can fully be dissociated from “meaning” has been disputed. Indeed, along with his attitude to aesthetics, it remains one of the most contentious aspects of Gell's theory; an extensive bibliography attempts to reconcile his insights with the use of signs and symbols (see Pinney and Thomas 2001 *passim*; Layton 2003). Yet as scholars have sought non-linguistic models to describe the relationship between viewer and artwork, interest has grown in affective qualities of art that are neither symbolic nor aesthetic. David Freedberg (1989: xx), notably, draws attention to “unrefined, basic, preintellectual, raw” human responses to art: people are moved to tears or incited to rebellion. These are forms of affect that do not easily yield to linguistic or aesthetic analysis. They also have a clear parallel in Gell's interest in social and emotional responses to artifacts, and the “terror, desire, awe, fascination,” rather than aesthetic appreciation, that they can evoke (Gell

Recent studies of ancient Near Eastern art focus on affective qualities from an analytical perspective (Winter 2002, 2007; Feldman 2009). These qualities have long been discussed because of their importance in indigenous Mesopotamian attitudes to art objects. The languages of ancient Mesopotamia furnish a rich vocabulary for the positive attributes of what we would consider art objects. Admirable qualities in Sumerian and Akkadian include ornamentation, grace, vitality, luminosity, luxuriance, and wielding power (Winter 1994; 2002: 11). Response to objects is often closer to awe or admiration than to Kantian aesthetic appreciation. The term *melammu*, for example, describes radiance that inspires wonder or even dread, while the deep emotion associated with sight, which Irene Winter (2000b) terms “cathected viewing,” can be seen in the wide-eyed stares of Mesopotamian votive statuary. In their immediacy and power, and in their physical nature, these traits resemble the responses catalogued in contemporary discussions of affect.

Object Agency

In this theoretical landscape, the question of how objects participate socially is compelling. Because agency is the dominant sociological model, fitting objects into this account—i.e., modeling objects as agents—is an obvious possible way to conceptualize their function. But the fit is not entirely easy: how far objects can usefully be considered as like or unlike human agents is problematic.

Perhaps the most serious objection to ascribing agency to objects is the implication that they have volition and intention, forms of internal “mind” normally attributed exclusively to persons. One possible resolution is to question the extent to which volitions or intentions are, in fact, crucial to agency. As previously noted, theories of human agency recognize, to varying degrees, the extent to which actions may have unconscious motivations and unintended consequences. If humans exert agency that is not fully intentional, either in its preconception or in its effects, it is debatable how important intention is for ascribing agency. Perhaps *agency* is better defined as *socially effective action*, with the emphasis on volition removed.

A stronger version of this position does not merely suggest that human agency is limited by unconscious motivations and unintended consequences, but questions whether humans have volition or intention *at all* in a meaningful sense. From certain philosophical perspectives, the belief that other humans have “minds” is far from secure; the belief that they exercise free will is even less so. If human agency is modeled as essentially deterministic and

mechanistic—a view frequently entertained from a biological or evolutionary perspective—then material and human agency can be described as the same process. In either stronger or weaker form, such externalist accounts render the ascription of agency to objects much less problematic.

One variant is the position adopted by Actor-Network-Theory, a theory of object agency developed by Bruno Latour (2005). Actor-Network-Theory takes the agency of the material world as fundamental:

The world ... is continually *doing things* ... Think of the weather. Winds, storms, droughts, floods, heat, and cold—all of these engage with our bodies as well as our minds, often in life-threatening ways ... Much of everyday life, I would say, has this character of coping with material agency, agency that comes at us from outside the human realm and that cannot be reduced to anything within that realm. (Pickering 1995: 6)

Like many discussions of object agency, Actor-Network-Theory stresses the extent to which human agency is enacted through materiality, arguing that the study of human agency inevitably entails the study of objects because human agency takes place in the physical world. This quality of “doing things”—agency in the sense of having effect in the physical world, *without* reference to intention—applies to technology and material culture as well as to the natural world. Latour occasionally discusses art, here too noting the latent agency (in the sense of efficacy, not intentionality) of art objects through their affective properties: “If you are listening to what people are saying, they will explain at length about how and why they are deeply *attached, moved, affected* by works of art which ‘make them’ feel things” (Latour 2005: 236, emphasis in the original). Actor-Network-Theory does not model human and material agency as identical, but sees them as essentially symmetrical: human and non-human actors exist in a “flattened landscape,” in which neither has primacy nor is reducible to the other. Agency is seen as emergent, arising through the association of heterogeneous actors influencing each other in various ways.

An alternative resolution preserves the intentionality and internal volition of human agency, arguing that material objects have a secondary form of agency, which depends on that of humans. This is the position adopted by Gell (1998: 17), who differentiates between *primary* agency, exercised by self-sufficient, causative (human) agents, and *secondary* or *distributed* agency, which artifacts acquire once they become “enmeshed in a texture of social relationships.” “Secondary” does not mean that objects are less important than human agents: since human agency is exercised through the material world, objects are essential to the process. Nevertheless, the ultimate motivation behind the actions is always human.

Gell’s account does allow that objects’ physical characteristics have effects in their own right. The impact of the visual complexity or “technical virtuosity” of art affects the viewer/patient; through it they infer the power of whoever

masters or commands this skill. This is fundamental to the process of the abduction of agency. An emphasis on the ways in which art objects “fascinate, compel and entrap” is, indeed, a way in which Gell’s account avoids being reductive (Gell 1998: 23; Pinney and Thomas 2001: 5). Despite the importance of the objects’ physical characteristics, however, due to the “intentional” definition of agency, these affective qualities are considered as distinct from primary agency, a distinction also made in the ancient Near East (Winter 2007).

So, in this model, how exactly do objects have agency? In Mesopotamia, objects influenced the world typically by harnessing divine power, but Gell suggests that the abduction of agency from objects is an innate function of the human mind. Technical virtuosity elaborates and strengthens this response, but it occurs in any object that has or seems to have its origin in manufacture, however simple. Gell derives this idea in part from the naturalness of the index in Peirce’s semiotics, but more immediately from the work of cognitive psychologist Pascal Boyer (Osborne and Tanner 2007: 11–12). Trying to explain the widespread incidence of certain cross-cultural phenomena, Boyer postulates the existence of intuitive mental patterns common to all human beings. These include the inductive inference of cause or motivation that he terms abduction. Drawing on this notion, Gell suggests that an interest in the abduction of agency from objects is inherent in human thought. It is a result of this intuitive human tendency to interpret objects socially that the abduction of agency from art objects takes place.

Both Gell’s and Latour’s models are philosophically defensible. In both cases, their understanding of the role of objects is due partly to the context in which the argument is made: Gell’s close focus on the abduction of agency, as opposed to the much wider range of object-created effects considered by Actor-Network-Theory, is a result of his interest in art, in contrast to Latour’s focus on the technological world.

Object Agency and the Ancient Near East

Apart from its current influence in the theoretical world and its concern with art objects, Gell’s model of object agency is interesting for our purposes because (although he does not discuss the ancient Near East) there are strong parallels between his argument and the ancient Mesopotamian view. The wearing of an amulet or the destruction of the king’s sculpted face are both precisely “actions intended to change the world.” Moreover, in both accounts the formal qualities of objects contribute to their agency—the size and form of gate guardians, for instance, are part of their power—but are not its essence (see Figure 14.2).

There is also a correspondence between the Mesopotamian account and Gell's concept of "distributed personhood," an idea he derives from the work of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern (Davis 2007: 208). Gell suggests that fragments of *primary* intentional agents are proliferated in *secondary* artifactual form, i.e., through the objects associated with them. This account of the dispersed and multiple agent is closely similar to the Mesopotamian concept of extended personhood discussed above.

Scholars of the ancient Near East examining object agency in this cultural sphere have adopted a broadly Gellian approach. Discussing perspectival shifts in the Stele of Hammurabi, Marian Feldman (2010) observes the agentive relationship these formal changes create between object, viewer, and king. She locates the stele within a social network and considers the power relations—in this case, a shift from city-state to territorial governance—established through it. Similarly, Anne Porter (2010) discusses jars from third-millennium Ebla as nodes in a series of social interactions. She focuses on the "cultural appropriation" of these objects by craftsmen, cultic specialists, servants, and subordinates, as well as by elites, a concept that shares the same intellectual climate as agency: both are interested in individual and oppositional social acts. Another associated concept is identity, which Timothy Matney (2010) discusses, along with agency, with reference to the role of ceramics for diverse identity formation in Iron Age southeastern Anatolia. These discussions are driven by contemporary intellectual concerns, but find agency a useful term with which to describe Mesopotamian society.

Ancient Mesopotamians themselves were not strict Gellians; the two positions are not entirely congruent. The difference lies not so much in questions of intentionality—the Mesopotamian and Gellian positions are close in this respect—but in the ontological system within which agency is held to operate. In Mesopotamia, objects affect the world through principles of similarity and substitution, grounded in a divine conception of the cosmos. In Gell's model, based ultimately in a secular, psychological account, objects acquire their (secondary) agency through the innate human propensity to infer human intention from the material world.

Gell's argument switches back and forth between etic and emic perspectives. Indeed, Gell can be seductively ambiguous about where his sympathy really lies, stating that, as an anthropologist, he is interested not in establishing the most rationally defensible model, but rather in exploring "forms of thought which ... are ... socially and cognitively practicable" (1998: 17). Due to these interests, Gell's model of agency is one that easily accommodates the ascription of agency to a god or describes causal beliefs at variance with those of the modern intellectual world. Ancient Mesopotamians were not Gellians, but similarities in their thought mean that their system is well described within Gell's account.

Conclusions

If Mesopotamian art provides a useful case study for object agency, how much does contemporary theory contribute to ancient Near Eastern scholarship? In a sense it merely rephrases issues long established in discussions of Mesopotamian art objects. Yet there are potential advantages to the theoretical model of object agency, one of which is that it enables a comparative understanding of Mesopotamian art. Gell's model, in particular, facilitates comparison of Mesopotamian art with other cultures and does so in innovative ways. By emphasizing the abduction of agency, it reclassifies art objects according to the agentive structures involved in their creation, rather than by typical art historical categories (such as date, genre, material, style, or subject). This reclassification can uncover similarities between what seem to be highly distinct types of object.

To take one example, an agentive analysis foregrounds similarities between the patterns of agency in Mesopotamian and classical art—James Whitley (2012: 594) argues that the latter is itself best understood in agentive terms—whereas an art historical perspective tends to emphasize the formal differences between them. Moreover, both become part of a wider debate, which has been used to discuss behaviors as superficially disparate as the “aesthetic appreciation” of contemporary art gallery audiences and idol-worship (Davis 2007: 203).

The extent to which these comparisons remain exact once “pure” abduction has been historically and culturally situated remains controversial (Davis 2007; Van Eck 2010). Nevertheless, such a comparative model offers a rigorous analytical basis from which to discuss the differences between the Mesopotamian use of art and that of other cultures. Rather than bracketing off “magical thinking” as culturally specific and misguided behavior, the Gellian model highlights similarities between the logic of the Mesopotamian tradition and that of other systems of artistic operation.

The rise of object agency theory and its congruence with the Mesopotamian understanding of art (admittedly itself filtered through contemporary intellectual perspectives) also suggests that the latter may have real philosophical strengths—most obviously the emphasis on the power of art to do things in the world—which have been undervalued within an art historical tradition dominated by classically derived aesthetics. This similarity does not necessarily legitimate the entire Mesopotamian view—many of the theological and ontological beliefs underlying Mesopotamian practice remain problematic to modern analytical perspectives—but it displays the strengths

of the position and highlights aspects of our own interactions with objects that previously were underplayed. Recent years have seen studies of Mesopotamian concepts of representation reinvigorated; this development is perhaps a parallel phenomenon.

Agency theory is itself historically situated: the concept was developed in a specific political and theoretical context. It will be interesting to see how durable the term *agency* turns out to be. Perhaps the coincidence between ancient Mesopotamian and contemporary views will prove to be transient. Nevertheless, that the phenomenon (if not the terminology) has been so long discussed in ancient Near Eastern studies, and that the behavior was so long practiced in the Mesopotamian world, suggests that the concept of object agency may have a long intellectual life.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Steadman and Ross 2010 is one of the few texts explicitly to discuss the term *agency* in a Near Eastern context. The introduction outlines the concept and its relationship to “identity”; Feldman’s chapter looks specifically at the agency of objects, as nodes of social interaction. Bahrani 2003 and Verderame 2013 provide recent accounts of Mesopotamian ideas on the power of objects and the process of substitution through which such power is acquired; May 2012b offers multiple contributions on the inverse phenomenon: the damage and destruction of objects.

The introduction to Dobres and Robb 2000 gives an excellent summary of the rise of agency as an interdisciplinary concept, although primarily concerning its role in archaeology; Hicks 2010 provides another recent valuable summary. Gell’s influential views on the agency of art are primarily expounded in Gell 1998; see also Layton 2003 and Davis 2007 for criticisms and developments of his ideas. Winter 2007 responds to Gell’s ideas with reference to ancient Near Eastern material and aesthetics.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aesthetics

Gebhard J. Selz

Introduction

The concept of aesthetics long applied to the study of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts drew largely on ideas developed in the modern period for European art.¹ Despite recent efforts by Zainab Bahrani (2003, 2014) and others, this traditional approach still prevails.² New physiological or neurological approaches have thus far had little influence and remain highly speculative.³ Ancient Mesopotamian texts reflecting an engagement with more theoretical aspects of (visual) representation are rare but not entirely unknown, as we shall see.

Aesthetics is often understood as an attempt to describe the principles governing the nature and appreciation of beauty and artistic taste, not only emphasizing the role of the viewer but also referring to a quite specific Realm of the Senses, which is taste. Such metonymic transfers of qualities ascribed to perceptive-cognitive abilities were also common in ancient Mesopotamia. Thus it seems worthwhile to begin by looking at terms referring to specific senses. This analysis can as yet be done only in a preliminary way, as the states of lexicography for the two principal languages of Mesopotamian cuneiform texts differ significantly. Whereas the meaning of Akkadian words is reasonably well researched, chiefly because of the two major dictionaries, comparable efforts for the Sumerian lexicon are dispersed and not readily available.⁴

Aesthetics and Perception, Senses and Communication

The following discussion is grounded in and largely confined to a concept of “aesthetics as a theory of perception,” much as Walter Benjamin advocated (Jennings 1992; Ortland 1998). From the outset, we have to keep in mind that the five senses—faculties of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch—possess quite different properties. Taste, smell, and touch are ephemeral in nature,

lacking permanence.

We distinguish in Mesopotamia four to five basic categories of taste: sweet, sour, salty, and bitter (and umami). The linguistic boundaries of the related terms are, of course culturally determined, and in Akkadian and Sumerian their specific lexicon remains opaque. Thus, what we label as “salt water” in Mesopotamia is called “bitter water” (**a-ses resp. a-uri₃** = Akkadian *marratu*), a term that also includes all sorts of brackish water and is contrasted with **a-dug₃(-ga)** “sweet water” (or **a-zal** “fresh, running water”).

According to a recent study that applied statistical techniques to develop a systematic approach to them, there are probably about ten basic categories of odor (Castro, Ramanathan, and Chennubhotla 2013). The Mesopotamian terminology for smell is thus far little understood. As in many languages, some of the categories for taste are, by metaphoric analogy, transferred to the realm of smell. In addition, numerous terms derive from the specific odor of a given material, especially fragrances and aromatics (**šim** = Akk. *rīqu*). Cedar (**eren**), for instance, was not only indispensable for the large-scale roofing of buildings, but was also renowned for its pleasant aroma. Numerous passages mention the positive, appealing power of “sweet smell,” fragrances and incense. Aromatics play a prominent role in the texts. After the flood had receded, Uta-napishti’s attempt to reconcile the gods is described as follows: “I strew incense on the peak of the mountain. Seven flasks and seven I set in position, below them I heaped up (sweet) reed, cedar, and myrtle. The gods smelled the savor, the gods smelled the sweet savor, the gods gathered like flies around the sacrifice” (*Gilgamesh* XI 158–63) (George 2003: 1: 712). In a parallel passage in the Atrahasis story, “the gods sniffed] the smell, they gathered [like flies] over the offering” (Lambert and Millard 1969: 99 to III v 34–35.163 f.) (see further Rendu-Loisel 2013). From the archaeological side, numerous incense burners attest to smell as a major means of communicating with the gods. Besides the word **šim**, which is certainly connected to the verb **sim**, “to smell, sniff,” the term **ir** (*erešu*; *zūtu*) “scent” is also well attested, as is the combined noun **ir-šim**, designating all sorts of fragrances.

A malodorous, fetid odor, on the other hand, is termed **hab₂** = *alappānu*; *bīšu*; *ekēlu*; *happu*. Among the demons chasing the shepherd Dumuzi(d), “there were two men of Adab who came for the king. They were thistles in dried-up waters, they were thorns in stinking waters” (*Dumuzid’s Dream* ll. 119–20). There is also “stinker” (**hab₂-ba**), attested as a person’s nickname, and we also read “like a hyena, you will not eat it unless it stinks” (*Proverb Collection* 8b 15).

The general word for “to touch” is **tag** = *lapātu*. Sumerian often specifies “to touch with hands” (**šu-de₆**; **šu tum₃** or **šu-dug₄**). Strikingly, **šu-tag** is also the word for “to decorate” (*za’ānu*). In commemorative inscriptions the term often refers to unspecified embellishments of temples. For our purposes, the semantics of Akkadian *lapātu* asks for comment. According to the

dictionaries, the basic semantics of *=lapātu* is “to touch lightly, to touch in a symbolic act, to touch, to come (accidentally) in contact, to put hands on with evil intention, to commit a sacrilege, to apply water or fire, to smear on, to paint a surface, to write down, record, to fashion an object,” and so on (CAD L 82). The derived noun *liptu*, on the other hand, designates “(handi)work, craft, creation (with ref. to human beings), (in the plural) sense of touch, affliction, disease” (CAD L 200). *Lipit qāti*, “the touch with hands,” is also a specific ritual act. The common name type *Lipit-DN* apparently implies the notion that the name-bearer received life when he was created by a divinity. Touch can also be a source of danger. It is “contagious” in the sense that potentially harmful qualities or diseases are transferred by touching, hence the Mesopotamian concept of “taboo” (**niĝ₂-gig**, “that which is bad, forbidden; evil” = *ikkibu*; *lemnūtu* and **azag** = Akk. *asakku*). From these observations we deduce that “touch” is used for intimate close contact with positive or evil outcome, and consequently often has a magical connotation.

The sense of hearing certainly held a prominent position within the Mesopotamian concept of the senses. Here again, there are no reflective treatises, either on music or poetic language. In recent years, aspects of ancient music have received some attention.⁵ A concise and comprehensive study of Mesopotamian poetics has yet to be written.⁶ We also lack a synthetic treatment of performing arts, “theater,” and its origin in the (staged) ritual or cultic drama (Simon 2011; Evans 2014).

With acts of speaking and listening, the underlying question is how far Mesopotamian literature was oral or aural (Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1992). Much literature was probably transmitted orally, before the texts received the form we know from written documentation. On the other hand, many such texts originated in, and seem to be restricted to, a scribal environment. In most cases such texts were read aloud, as was common in many premodern societies (Busch 2002). But the visual perception of the written and its productive force should not be underestimated. “Word” plays as well as “sign” plays are attested in all sorts of Mesopotamian exegetic endeavors.

The ephemeral nature of speaking and listening was finally overcome when glottographic writing appeared at the beginning of the third millennium, providing a means to record speech and make it last. The fixing of oral utterances became possible, achieved by a switch in the media. Unlike spatially organized movable objects and spatially oriented visual representations, temporal properties are intrinsically linked to sounds (and speech). The trick of glottographic writing is to combine both spatial and temporal aspects. It is noteworthy that in the Mesopotamian world, both hearing and sight were considered the major sources of wisdom.

The general word for “to hear” in Sumerian is the compound verb **ĝeš–tuku** (unknown etymology), in Akkadian *šemû*. The Sumerian verb is connected to the noun “ear,” **ĝeš₂tug**/, also meaning “reason, plan; (to be) wise; wisdom,

understanding; ear” (in Akkadian *hassu*; *uznu*; *ṭēmu*). Another Sumerian word is/**ĝizzal**/“wisdom; understanding; ear; hearing,” with much the same Akkadian equivalents. The language is also able to stress auditory activity, like English “to listen”: **ĝeš-la₂** may be understood as “to lend an ear (?),” “to listen.” **geštu₂-deg_x(RI)** means “to bring an ear to” > “to listen, to ponder”; **ĝeštug₂-du₃** as **ĝeštug₂-ĝar**; **geštu₂-ga₂-ga₂** and **ĝeštug₂-šum₂** means “to set an ear to,” “to listen.” The last expression has also the meaning “to bestow ears (= wisdom)” > “to give wisdom.” By metonymy the Sumerian word for ear also denotes “wisdom,” for which **nam-gal-an-zu** “to know big things,” “wisdom,” **nam-kug-zu** “to know shining/holy things,” and simple **nam-zu** are also attested.⁷ An ancient and common word, and a term for “wise man,” also a craftsman, is **gašam** = Akkadian *mūdū*; *ummiānu*; *šipru*, “(to be) knowing, wise; sending, mission; work; craftsman, specialist.” It originally referred to profession and seems to stress technical skills.

Most often the term *aesthetics* refers to (the qualities of) visual perception. Indeed, for the Mesopotamians eyesight was even more important than hearing: it occupied a prominent position in their concept of the senses. This inference is supported by numerous depictions of eyes, both on artifacts and buildings. Whether we should interpret the many “eye stones” attested in all periods as a magical means against the “evil eye” is not entirely clear.⁸ With contextual differences, the viewer and the viewed played an active part in the act of seeing.⁹ Gaze, particularly divine gaze, is extremely powerful. It can be a matter of death or life: “(Ishtar), wherever you gaze, the dead come to life, the invalid arises” (*a-šar tap-pal-la-si i-bal-luṭ* ^{lú}ADDA *i-te-eb-bi mar-šu*).¹⁰ As an example, I suggest the following contextual reconstruction of a decorated Early Dynastic “spouted vessel” (Figure 15.1). Such vessels were used in the context of reviving plants, to which the vessel’s “rosettes” symbolically refer. The eyes, on the other hand, connote the life-giving divine glance.¹¹



Figure 15.1 Spouted vessel with “eyes” and rosette. Uruk, Eanna precinct; Late Uruk (ca. 3100 BCE). Stone with mosaic inlay; 15 × max. dia. ca. 7 cm. Iraq Museum. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

New research has demonstrated that the distinction between active seeing and being seen was of great importance. In her dissertation, Ainsley Dicks (2012) discussed the Sumerian and Akkadian terminology and rightly emphasized the

quite different grammatical construction of the terms: in the case of Sumerian, all are “compound verbs, almost exclusively with **igi** [“eye”] as nominal constituent” (see also Karahashi 2000). In Akkadian the general verb *amāru*, “to see,” is attested in numerous semantic specifications. The usage and the semantic connotation of the verbs for vision attested in cuneiform texts are quite diverse, and a closer look at the Sumerian terminology is highly informative.

igi-bar is strictly a verb of active vision, meaning “to open (split) the eyes,” “to look at,” “to watch” and “to gaze,” with the Akkadian equivalents *barû* and *naplusu*,¹² as does the compound **igi-ġar** “to place the eye” and the related **igi-gub** and **igi-sig₁₀**. In contrast, the also common **igi-du₈** (also **igi-duh**), “to open the eyes,” stresses the perceptive side of vision, “to see” (in Akkadian *amāru*, but also *naplusu*; *naṭālu*). In similar contexts we find **igi-il₂** “to lift the eyes” (*našû ša īni*), which stresses the viewer’s deferential position in awaiting messages. Also quite common is **igi-gal₂** (Akk. *dagālu*), literally “to let the eyes rest upon something,” hence “to look at fixedly,” “to ponder over,” and “to be wise.” A related expression is **igi-zu** “to get informed by vision,” “to be wise.” Less common is **igi-la₂** “to watch” (= Akk. *naṭālu*). The literal meaning is probably “to bend (hang) the eyes over something”,¹³ compare also the rare **igi-tab**, “to cover with the eyes.”¹⁴ Also interesting is the verb **pad₃**, written IGI + RU, the sign etymology meaning eye + throwing. The Akkadian translations of **pad₃** are *atû*, “to find, discover,” and *nabû*, “to name, to select by naming.” In a semantic play we find also **igi-pad₃**; compare **du₁₀ nu-siki-ke₄ a-a-ni-gin₇ igi-bi ma-ra-pad₃** “Utu, the orphans look to you as to their father” (see Kramer 1985: 123; following Dicks 2012: 11).

Few verbs refer to the emotional aspect involved in viewing. **igi-gid₂** seems idiomatic and literally means something like “to narrow one’s eyes,” used with negative connotations; “to look with disfavor” (Akk. *nekelmû*).¹⁵ Attestations of **igi-hul**, “to look with envy,” are rare.

Positive emotions evoked by the sight of something are expressed by the verb **u₆-e/dug/di**, actually an expression of astonishment and admiration. The compound verb apparently refers to an exclamation “to say wow,” and has no simple Akkadian equivalent. For our subject the verb is remarkable, in that it clearly confirms the connection between perception and “beauty.” In *Ninurta’s Exploits*, the hero addresses the Elal stone (Il. 495–96): “you (the stone) shall be set up on a pedestal in my great courtyard. The Land Sumer shall praise you in admiration, the foreign lands shall speak your praise”

(**kalam-e u₆ dug₃-ge-eš he₂-a-e kur-kur he₂-mi-i-i**). In *Lugalbanda and the Anzu Bird*, we read, “I shall have the woodcarvers fashion statues of you, and you will be breathtaking to look upon (**u₆-e gub-ba-me-en**). Your name will be made famous in the Land Sumer and will redound to the credit of the temples of the great gods” (Il. 181–83).

While **u₆-dug** (and the related grammatical forms **u₆-e** and **u₆-di**) means “to say wow,” the pertinent passages should be studied in connection with the Mesopotamian notion of beauty (the Akkadian equivalents *amārum* and *barūm* are here less informative). “They are placing white cedar in its rear room of cedar, an admirable sight” (**àga-eren igi-u₆-di-bi-a eren-bar₆-bar₆ im-ġá-ġá-ne**) (Gudea 1.1.7. Cylinder A xxii 4) (Dicks 2012: 195). “The glory of the temple, which once was sweet, that glory was destroyed” (**é u₆-di-bi ì-dùg-ga-re u₆-di-bi ba-gul**) (*Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* 426) (Dicks 2012: 197). Similarly, emotions are also evoked by the compound verbs **igi-sag₉** “to look at with favor,” and **igi saġ-ki-zalag bar**, “to look favorably” (actually a semantic specification of **igi-bar** “to gaze at” specified by **sag-ki-zalag** “bright/friendly face”).

For the Mesopotamian concept of seeing it is extremely important that seeing was conceived as both active and passive. The eye was not only the target, but also “the source of an outward-emanating force” (Dicks 2012: 112). This notion reminds us of the classical concept of viewing, in which the eyes were thought to send forth rays of vision.¹⁶ The difference between gazing and the rather passive viewing has fundamental significance for Mesopotamian modes of representation, although it is not always clear whether the verbs prioritize vision as perception or as action.

Both in Sumerian and Akkadian there are several verbs for an unfavorable gaze, with the basic meaning “to glare at” and “to look down on.” Unfavorable vision, human or divine, “is chiefly expressed in Sumerian through value-neutral verbs of vision coupled with negative modifiers” (Dicks 2012: 321).¹⁷ As Dicks (2012: 320) remarks, “the Sumerian sources depict a sharp distinction between divine and human unfavorable vision: while the gods gaze angrily, wreaking destruction on the objects of their glare.”

I suggest that gaze—active viewing—plays a fundamental part in Mesopotamian aesthetic concepts, reflected even in formal modes of representation. Active viewing is primarily conceived as a divine power. As Dicks (2012: 274) observes, “both the Sumerian and Akkadian literary sources depict influential gaze as a fundamentally divine power, shared in a very small number of instances by human kings.”

Principles of Aesthetic Judgment

Classifying something as “good” or “bad” seems to be a human universal. It may originate with utilitarian judgments, but it always includes emotional assessments. In transferred or widened usage this grid also provides insight into the appraisal of “beauty.” Needless to say, this has little to do with the European notion of “beauty”-related disinterest and non-utility, as Irene

Winter (2002: 8) rightly noted.

Visual arts often use *aesthetic* to describe the quality of visual perception. “Beauty” lies in the eyes of the beholder, and the problems of applying the term to widely differing cultures are well known; any attempt to establish a “standard of taste” remains therefore highly speculative. The notion of beauty is also interwoven with the attribution of value. In addition to the rather objective factors of the material value of an item—the cost of materials or production—value always has a more subjective side, linked to attributed esteem and prestige. A brief look at the Sumerian and Akkadian terminology thus seems worthwhile.

The most general term for *beautiful* is/**sag**/wr. **sag8**; **sag9**; **sag10**; **šeg10**; **sag12** “(to be) good, sweet, beautiful; goodness, good (thing)” (Akk. *banû*; *damāqu*; *dumqu*; *ṭābu*).¹⁸ An apparent homophone is/**sag**/written **sag10**; **sag8** “(to be of) high quality; (to be) rare, precious” (Akk. *aqrû*; *aqāru*). The difference between the readings/**sag**/and/**kal**/of the sign KAL, if the readings are correct, remains unknown. **kal(-la)**, however, is clearly “(to be) rare, valuable” (Akk. *aqāru*). It appears that the notions of “beauty” and “preciousness” are semantically linked.

Commonly used for describing “good” quality (often of specific items) is/**du(g)**/, written **dug3**; **ze2-eb**; **du-uq** “(to be) good; (to be) sweet; goodness, good (thing)” (Akk. *ṭābu*). The word may be borrowed from the sense of taste, with the basic meaning “sweet.” This is certainly the case for/**kud**/“sweet” **ku7** “(to be) good; (to be) (honey-)sweet” (Akk. *dašpu*; *matqu*; *ṭābu*) and/**lal**/written **lal3** “(to be) sweet; (to be) good” and as noun “syrup; honey” Akk. *dišpu*; *matqu*; *ṭābu*. Comparatively rare is **zil2** “(to be) good; (to be) beneficent” (Akk. *damāqu*). Another word for “beautiful” is **mu5** “good, beautiful” (Akk. *banû*); the writing with the sign NI (= **zal**) may indicate the notion of shining. Sumerian has numerous words for “shining, glowing, blaze, and flashing,” which demonstrate the importance attributed to visual perception (Cassin 1968; Winter 2002; 2012). Most interesting here is **kug**, which designates “purity” and “shining” and is used to specify metals (e.g., **kug-babbar2** “shining, white metal = silver” and **kug-GI/sig17** “dark/yellow-green metal = gold”).

The rather specific expression/**galam**/means “artfully” and “(to be) skillful, elaborate, clever; to make artfully, elaborate”; the Akkadian equivalent is *naklu*, which also corresponds to Sumerian/**urun**/, written **urunx**(EN). These terms expressively refer to artful, elaborate, and refined fabrication. Beauty also provides pleasure (**zil2**): “(Repeat the message) to my protective guardian and propitious spirit—the precious powers—whose form and stature are pleasing” (a-la!-ad **ḏalad ḏlamma diġir kal-la-ġu10** (*ša’ i-di*) **ulutim2 alan zil2-zil2-i**) (*Letter from Lugal-nesaġe to Enlil-massu* l. 4). The notion of appeal and attraction is tied to Sumerian **u6-e/di/dug4**, an exclamation of astonishment and admiration. More specific **hi-li**; **hilib2** refers to “sex appeal;

(to be) voluptuous, luxuriant; to have pleasure” (Akk. *kuzbu*; *šamhu*).¹⁹ The word/**hili**/also designates “a ritual wig” or a specific hairdo. “Man of my heart, my beloved man, your allure is a sweet thing, as sweet as honey (**hi-li-zu aġ2 ze2-ba-am3 la3-[am3 ku7-ku7-da]**)” (A balbale to Inana for Šu-Suen [*Šu-Suen B*] ll. 1–2).

Aesthetic qualities are often described by a wide range of words related to luminosity: to shine, to be brilliant, to glow, flash, radiate, and so on. Since no comprehensive lexical study of this term is available (but see Cassin 1968), I will mention only two interesting terms. **mul** (Akk. *kakkabu*; *mulmullu*; *nabāṭu*) designates stars, and the “light-radiating”; **kug** means “shiny,” and by semantic extension also has the meaning “(to be) pure” (Akk. *ellu*). Used as an apposition to divine names, **kug** seems originally to refer to the astral conception of certain deities. But it was often used rather vaguely, suggesting the (usual) translation “holy.” We can safely state that “luminosity” played a key role within the Mesopotamian concept of beauty.

The word commonly translated as “bad” or even “ugly” is **hul-dim2**, literally “poorly/badly produced,” then “rotten, ugly.” Its Akkadian equivalent is *masku*. Dislike is expressed by the rare Sumerian **gú-du3** “to turn(?) the neck” > “to dislike” (also: to act wickedly) (Akk. *zêru*). **hul-gig**, and other compounds with **hul(u)** connote the notion of “evil,” specifically referring to acts of destruction; **gig** has the basic meaning of “being sick, to sicken” (Akk. *marāṣu*; *marṣu*), and **niġ2-gig** is “that which is bad, forbidden; evil,” “the tabooed thing.” **hab2** originally meant “malodorous,” “stinking” (*bīṣu*).

Value and Prestige

As indicated earlier, the emotionally based aesthetic judgment, in the sense of “beautiful,” always seems intertwined with the notion of value. In the ancient Near East, the economic value of materials and items was not only related to the difficulties of acquiring raw materials and the cost of production; it almost exclusively embraced symbolic and functional aspects. This fact is best demonstrated by the late series of texts with the incipit *abnu šikinšu*, “the stone of which the design (is as) follows” (Schuster-Brandis 2008). This series deserves a thorough investigation under the rubric of Mesopotamian aesthetics. Here we simply note a gender-oriented color distribution: red (carnelian) is connected with female, blue (lapis lazuli) with male spheres. Although the series may be a late and rather systematic elaboration, a number of semiprecious stones and their symbolic values are conceived as protagonists in the text *Ninurta’s Exploits* and either blessed or cursed by the god, according to their properties. Diorite, a very hard stone that is difficult to work, is described as the material from which the durable statues of rulers,

such as Gudea, are manufactured. Here the material is functionally related to the purpose of such statues: to ensure the afterlife of the persons represented.²⁰ The aim of cult statues, generally composed of various materials, is quite different: the materials demonstrate the far-reaching influence of a divinity by alluding to all the regions from which the materials were procured.

The absolute and relative size of representations also provided a means of conveying the notion of prestige. This observation applies to various works of art: different kinds of reliefs, as well as statuary and architecture. This semantic field is covered by the Sumerian word **mah**/meaning “sublime, exalted, or lofty” (the Akkadian translations are *kabtu*; *mādu*; *rabû*; *šîru*). The most striking examples of this sort of prestige are the temple towers, the ziggurat, whose Sumerian designation was **u₆-nir** (Cooper 1990). Its literal meaning was probably something like the “Lordly Wow.”

Moreover, contemporaneous and later ascription of prestige may differ. The age of artworks may have contributed to their value. The collection of Gudea statues preserved in the second-century BCE palace of Adad-nadin-ahhe may even compare with modern museology (Kose 2000; Suter 2012). Even the search by the “archaeologist” Nabonidus probably had motives other than religious piety (Schaudig 2003). The well-attested abductions of cult statues, like the Marduk statue from Babylon, also had manifold aims. Beyond the simple effort to acquire rare and expensive materials, booty demonstrated and added to one’s prestige, as shown by the raids of the Elamite Shutruk-Nahhunte (ca. 1185–1155 BCE), who carried to Susa, among other items, the Stele of Naram-Sin and the Stele of Hammurabi. Clearly, such raids were not motivated solely by the desire for rare and expensive materials.

Aesthetic Modalities

Any evaluation of the meaning and function of Mesopotamian aesthetics requires an integrated approach, because works of art have both a material and a functional side. Functional aspects include the issue of reception, whether the addressee is human or divine. In addition, the setting and environment in which they were perceived deserve careful observation to help improve our understanding and interpretation. This is not to deny the possibility of an unmediated access to art. The inherent polysemy, even ambiguity, is certainly a feature of many artworks, and the active role of the viewer (or reader) must not be ignored. While modern appreciation of ancient Mesopotamian art may have difficulties with this sort of ambiguity (Suter 2014), it can hardly be denied that such polysemy is at the core of Mesopotamian artistic production. As we seek the aims and concepts of Mesopotamian art, changes and gaps in transmission gain relevance. Moreover, the function of certain works very

likely changed over three millennia of tradition. The statuary of the third and the first millennia, for example, may have had significantly different rationales.

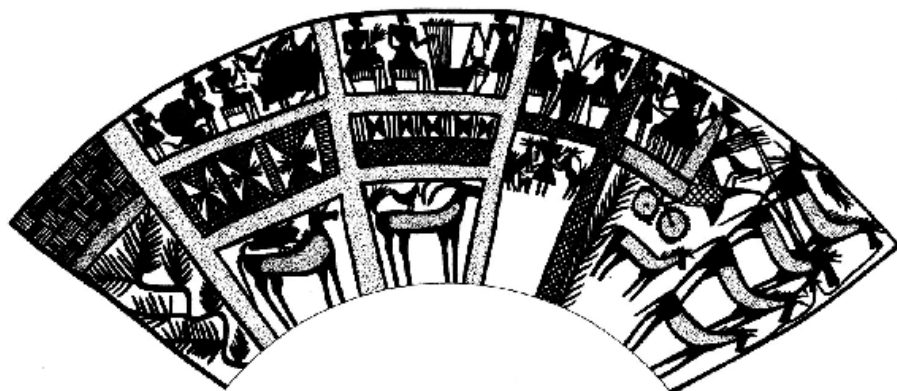
The symbolic function of colors may likewise largely escape us. The rare paintings preserved at Mari and Til Barsip, for example, and the colors of glazed bricks or painted vessels, hardly compensate for the loss (von Rüdén 2014). Traces of red, white, and black paint on the Neo-Assyrian reliefs suggest that much symbolic information is lost to us (Di Ludovico and Ramazotti 2012). Nor is it entirely clear whether our picture of Mesopotamian statuary is correct. Major cult statues of deities are missing, with the possible remarkable exception of the Warka head.²¹ Some statues may have worn different sorts of attire, as the role of the later *lubuštu* (clothing) ceremony reveals (Leemans 1952; Zawadzki 2006, 2013).

Scholars have become increasingly aware not only of the materiality of objects, for example the type of stone used, but also of the relationship with inscriptions.²² But the fact that writing and visual representations concern quite different media needs to be stressed. Even when depictions “illustrate” texts, correspondence is limited (Michalowski 1990; Cooper 2008; Crawford 2014; Sonik 2014). Unlike the *biblia pauperum* tradition, which visualized biblical texts, visual representations in Mesopotamia often preserved their own, independent status.²³

While all senses have a communicative aspect, with hearing and seeing communication is the primary feature. Yet these two occupy highly divergent positions in the realm of the senses. Listening to speech or music is time-bound: unless recorded, it “evaporates” in the air, or, to use another metaphor, it is only smoke and mirrors. The advantage of speech in communication is its unparalleled precision. Seeing, on the other hand, is space-bound. In viewing a material (permanent) object, the effects of time are small. The semantics of material objects or their representation, however, is less precise than that of oral utterances. It largely depends on their function, which might often change over time. As noted earlier, the invention of glottographic writing at the beginning of the third millennium altered the position of speech. This form of writing provided the means to record speech and make it last. Whereas visual representations or movable objects were spatially organized and oriented, temporal properties were intrinsically linked to sounds and therefore speech. Glottographic writing combines the spatial and temporal aspects, permitting “oral” communication to be prolonged. This interpretation is connected by the semantic interference of the Akkadian verbs *amāru*, *šasû* and *šatāru* (Dicks 2012: 129–33). We should also remember that until recent times “silent reading” was a limited practice.²⁴

Three-dimensional objects exhibit a strong relationship to space, and may even, as is self-evident with architectural elements, create space and be part of all sorts of mundane and ritual actions. Space is intrinsically linked to their

purpose and function. The change to two-dimensional representations, including reliefs, preserves these spatial properties. A major difference, however, is that the depiction of space itself becomes a new feature, and within this space depiction regularly refers to three-dimensional objects. As writing preserves and prolongs oral communication in a similar albeit structurally different way the pragmatic context of three-dimensional objects, their function may be represented in two-dimensional representations. Two examples may illustrate this point. The famous Uruk Vase—in fact there were two—is depicted on the upper register of the vase itself (see [Figure 11.1](#) in Collins and [Figure 8.2](#) in Green, this volume), and numerous roughly contemporary cylinder seals also show similar vessels. Another example is an Early Dynastic “Scarlet Ware” jar, where the vessel itself and the banquet in which it was used are represented on the vessel’s upper surface ([Figure 15.2](#)). Such recursive or self-referential features are quite common in the art of the ancient Near East and play an important role in its contextualization (Cheng [2007](#)).



Reconstructed Reconstruction of Body Design of a Scarlet Ware Vase from Kish, Iraq
Now in the British Museum (3rd, Pl. 55)

Figure 15.2 Drawing of decoration, “Scarlet Ware” jar (British Museum 123293). From P. Delougaz, *Pottery from the Diyala Region*, Oriental Institute Publications 63 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), pl. 138.

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

With two-dimensional representations we observe two different modalities: the emblematic and the linear arrangement of pictorial elements. The first evolves toward what Chiko Watanabe ([2004](#); [2014](#): 350–63), in discussing the Neo-Assyrian reliefs, termed the “centric.” The second may be compared with the “continuous” style of narration introduced to art history by the Viennese scholar Franz Wickhoff (see also Sonik [2014](#)). By definition, visual narratives are linked to the representation of a sequence of events, for which the continuous style is well suited. Within the history of Western art, this kind of representation became common for all kinds of historical narratives. Yet we

need to consider that representing visual narratives through a linear arrangement is by no means the only option.

Narrative depiction may originate in proto-historic periods; it certainly became a salient feature in the visual arts when representation developed the means to render time. These means originated with the invention of cylinder seals, which widely superseded earlier stamp seal practices and became one of the most important categories of Mesopotamian artifacts. The rolling of a cylinder seal on clay is in itself a time-bound process: it encapsulates time.²⁵ From the earliest one-register narratives multi-register representations soon evolved, and linear arrangement in registers was transferred to other groups of artifacts: the best and earliest example is the Uruk Vase. Such narratives can be read as text, representing a continuous sequence of events (Selz 2014). Whether these events are prototypical or refer to specific historical situations is difficult to judge. We observe, however, a fixed mode of reading, from bottom to top. Most scholars consider the Stele of the Vultures to represent the earliest historical narrative, although only the accompanying inscription establishes its historicity (Winter 1985; Selz and Niedermayer 2015).²⁶ Register-like arrangements, often with a clear dividing line, remain common in Mesopotamian depictions of events. Despite the inherent dynamics of many scenes, this organization conveys the impression of a stable and ordered world. There is one remarkable exception: on the Stele of Naram-Sin the individual registers, which lack dividing lines, are rendered diagonally (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume). This observation ties in nicely with other dynamic features, in both art and literature, in this period.

The linear arrangement of a story is well known from many visual representations down to modern times. For Mesopotamia the pertinent narratives of the Neo-Assyrian relief have received much attention. A much earlier and somewhat peculiar example is provided by the cult pedestal of Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE), where the different stages of the king approaching a pedestal are shown; a tablet with stylus, in this case probably an aniconic symbol for the god Nusku, tops the pedestal (see Figure 11.4 in Collins, this volume). Important is the image's recursive character—we can safely assume that such a tablet with stylus was actually placed on the pedestal—and the embedding of an art object in ritual pragmatics. This depiction also sheds light on the function of worshiper figurines. As important as inscribed objects are for our historical reconstructions, writing and visual representation retain their own media-specific modes.

Thus far we have connected linear arrangements with the dimension of time. Its use to create the illusion of space (and depth) seems restricted to first-millennium developments, as in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs, but even they lack a single vanishing point (Borchardt and Bleibtreu 2011). Stacking scenes one above another sometimes indicates spatial depth. In general, ancient Mesopotamian art is little concerned with creating illusion, focusing instead

on the explanatory factors of depiction. In a scene depicting a row of figures proceeding side by side, for example, outlines of their bodies are simply multiplied—a solution that is far from providing a “naturalistic” impression. Similarly, the guardian geniuses of the Neo-Assyrian palaces possess altogether five legs, the correct impression depending simply on the two major points of vision, from the front or the side (see [Figure 14.2](#) in Downes, this volume).

What at first glance appears to be an emblematic arrangement could, upon closer examination, also conceal narrative qualities. A good example is the relief from the throne room of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) at Nimrud depicting the king flanking the Sacred Tree installation (see [Figure 12.3](#) in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). This composition is neither emblematic nor a simple “rotational symmetry” (Watanabe 2014: 350–52, 362–63). The king’s posture and attire are quite different. Thus even the hypothesis that the king is shown circumambulating the tree is unsatisfactory, unless one assumes that the image refers to a ritual extending over a certain span of time and demanding a variation in the king’s attire.

The basic differences between emblematic and narrative depictions are essential for all interpretations of Mesopotamian art. This situation becomes clear when we look at the two major modes of representing living beings, animals and humans alike. Their frontal representation was thought to refer to mytho-magical spheres, whereas profile depictions are often found in narratives. True enough, both modes often appear intertwined. But if we connect these observations to the language-based concepts of seeing elaborated earlier, their significance becomes evident. We may look at a scene, a narrative, but the frontal image glares *at us*. In this way, such representations acquire a highly precise agency: the picture has an active role in visual communication, an issue also discussed in modern art theory (Didi-Huberman 1992, 2009). An appreciation of this concept is also essential for understanding the implications of the divine gaze, as outlined above. An interesting example—and evidence of an intentional and playful ambiguity well attested in Mesopotamian semasiographic writing—is the small stele depicting the mother goddess Ninhursanga as *potnia theron*, whose image can be read as representing either the goddess’s face or her sexual characteristics (Selz 2010). This example leads to another important observation: Mesopotamian statues were perceived as possessing and wielding power over the viewer because they were also perceived as living beings. Their lifelike status was achieved by a set of rituals, most prominently the “mouth-opening” and “mouth-washing” (Dick 1999).

Our brief description of Mesopotamian visual concepts permits us to elaborate further the agency of a depiction. We can sort the surviving group of Gudea statues by the following grids: material, size, seated and standing, bearded and beardless, bald and with wig (see [Figure 16.2](#) in Suter, this volume) (compare

Selz 2004: 45–47). From the accompanying inscriptions, especially the statues' names, we know that the statues were either submitting prayers for Gudea's life or receiving orders from various deities.

Although skilled craftsmanship was highly respected, the producers of artworks remain largely anonymous, hidden behind the names of the patrons, most often political rulers. The relative esteem of the producer is readily inferred from the numerous deities of craft: the carpenter, the stone-cutter, or the sculptor. One of the major Mesopotamian deities, Enki/Ea, the god of the sweet waters, magic lore and wisdom, was also responsible for artistic production, hence his epithet “the one who fashions and creates” (**d_{nu}-dim₂-mud**) (Kramer and Maier 1989). In certain cases, careful observation of stylistic and technical features permits the identification of workshops, perhaps influenced by a specific leading artist (Gunter 1990; Sasson 1990). How far “potmarks” or related non-textual markers on objects can be connected with such workshops or artists is not yet entirely clear (see De Maaijer 2001; Wagensonner 2009).

Especially for reasons of prestige, the size of an artifact and its elaboration may have contributed to its aesthetic value. Within a given depiction, relative size is clearly connected to ascribed significance. This significance of scale almost seems an art historical universal. Likewise, complex depictions nearly always allow identification of a central main scene, whereas the accompanying or secondary scenes may be part of a narrative split into different scenes, or simply provide additional information for its interpretation.

In addition to main and subsidiary scenes, Mesopotamian two-dimensional depictions often include a number of elements, which occasionally tend to fill out all available space. Such “filling motifs” are frequently understood as merely ornamental or decorative elements. In many cases, however, they actually comment on the scenes, alluding to their specific setting. In a similar way, we look in vain for portrait-like depictions. Depictions of humans, even more than of animals, display an idealizing tendency. Usually the point of reference is a certain type of being: ruler, domestic animal, or animal of prey.

In dealing with the specific modes, properties, and structures of visual representation we have mainly addressed their syntax, concentrating on third-millennium evidence. Some of the representational features described above remain important throughout the three millennia of Mesopotamian visual representations. A closer, historically oriented examination of these features, however, will certainly reveal major differences. Aesthetic norms were probably situated within different workshops and handled by anonymous artists. Beyond technical skills, representational norms were also observed, as the exceptional list of types of deities (*Göttertypentext*) may demonstrate. The statue of a “Mother Goddess” is described in the following ways, hinting at a certain standardization (*Göttertypentext* 3: 38'–51') (after Köcher 1953: 76–

79) (see Rendu-Loisel [2011](#)):

The head (wears) a Turban: and a bull's horn,
She wears a Pursasu-hairdo, and curly hair (?)
She has ragged hairs: her hands are (those of) humans
She is girded with a belt,
Her breast is naked,
In her left (hand) she carries a baby,
Suckling at her breast.
With her right she extends blessings;
Her body is that of a naked woman,
From her belt down to her fish-man-like pedestal
She (appears (?)) with scales like a snake
Wavy lines are drawn on her belly
Her name is Nintu (belong to) those of Dingirmah.

Conclusions

Although ancient Mesopotamia has not left us treatises on aesthetics or art, analysis of the vocabulary of sensual perception is good point of departure for studying the formal properties of visual representations. The context of a work of art, as well as its syntactical composition and their elements (morphemes), allow us to reconstruct major theoretical aspects of Mesopotamian “aesthetics.” Some of the fundamental principles of Mesopotamian visual representations are linear and emblematic arrangements in reliefs. Traces of aesthetic response, as attested in written sources, further elaborate the Mesopotamian notion of “aesthetics.” A possible *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*—no teleology intended—may eventually improve our understanding of evolving aesthetic notions. Absolute definitions of Mesopotamian aesthetics and art must not be its aim.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The papers in Gaut and Lopes [2013](#) provide a good overview of the history of aesthetics and aesthetic theory, along with discussion of specific issues and

the aesthetics of individual arts.

Arnheim 1974 is a pioneering work published more than 60 years ago, which remains a foundation for all discussion of (visual) aesthetics.

The contributions in Schellekens and Goldie 2011 address research in the empirical (cognitive) sciences and in philosophy/anthropology.

Holly and Moxey 2002 is a collection of papers exploring the connection between aesthetics and art history from a contemporary point of view.

Winter 2010 assembles previously published papers by the leading expert in ancient Near Eastern art history. Arguing from different perspectives, they provide much new insight into ancient Near Eastern concepts of aesthetics and art. See also relevant contributions in Suter and Uehlinger 2005. Woods 2010 provides a good overview of the state of research concerning visuality in the development of various early writing systems.

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NOTES

- 1 Gaut and Lopes 2013 survey historical, theoretical, and systematic aspects of aesthetics. For Mesopotamia, see Winter 2002.
- 2 See Winter 2002, however. Winter 1995 also sought to investigate the "indigenous lexicon of value."
- 3 In art historical circles, highly speculative reference to "mirror neurons" has become fashionable (Melser 2004; Schellekens and Goldie 2011).
- 4 Dicks 2012 impressively demonstrates the potential of such contextualized lexicographic studies. My heartfelt thanks to Ainsley Dicks for making her work available to me prior to publication.

- 5 Kilmer 1997; Volk 2006; Both et al. 2008, Dumbrill and Finkel 2010. Other studies address musical performance and dance: Collon 2003; Gabbay 2003; Garfinkel 2003.
- 6 Multiple works examine figurative language: Vogelzang and Vanstiphout 1996; Mindlin, Geller, and Wansbrough 2002; Streck 1999; Selz 2003. For comments on rhyme, lyrical symbolism, and performance, see Hecker 1974; Black 1998; Black et al. 2004.
- 7 Ultimately, wisdom has a divine source, and the “wisdom of Nissaba” (the goddess of writing) can designate the general term “knowledge”: **in-nin ĜEŠTUG₂.^dNISABA šag₄-ge uš gu₇** “(Nissaba,) the supreme lady of knowledge who gladdens the hearts” (*Ninurta’s Exploits* l. 713).
- 8 See Dicks 2012: 331–41. Others are skeptical about the role of the “evil eye” in Mesopotamia (Thomsen 1992; Geller 2003, 2004). Yet popular beliefs may not be reflected in more learned magical theories and practices.
- 9 From a philosophical art historical perspective, see Didi-Huberman 1992.
- 10 See Zgoll 2003: 44–45 (*Handerhebungsgebet Ištar* 21. 40).
- 11 The votive plaque from Girsu depicts the full context (Moortgat 1969: fig. 114). See also Selz forthcoming.
- 12 **igi-sud-bar** corresponds to Akkadian *šubbû* (*m*), a “verb of active vision with a fundamental meaning of—to look at from a distance” (Dicks 2012: 219–20).
- 13 Less likely is Dicks’s (2012: 99–101) interpretation as “to tie the eye (to).” I understand **la₂** instead in the well-attested sense “to hang, to suspend” (*šaqa₃lu*; *šuqalulu*), which also fits well the negative usage as “to look down on.” The verb **igi-KAR₂** is perhaps to be read **igi-gur₆** and may have a similar etymology; cp./**gurum** “to bend.” Cf. Dicks 2012: 97–99.
- 14 Following Dicks 2012: 107, “to look at”—literally, “to double the eyes” or perhaps “to cover with the eyes.”
- 15 Jacques 2006 treats comprehensively the Sumerian vocabulary of emotions.
- 16 See Simon 1992 and the application to interpreting aspective and perspective representations in Borchardt and Bleibtreu 2011.
- 17 For example, **igi-hul** “evil eye,” **igi-uš-a(k)** “the eye of death”; **igi-tum₂**, **tum₃**, **igi-gid₂** and **igi-tur** “to scorn” or the like, and **igi-suh**, often used with divine agentive.
- 18 For/**sag**/, written **sag₈**; **sag₉**; **sag₁₀**; **šeg₁₀**; **sag₁₂**, perhaps connoting “fresh,

blossoming”; *banû* may explicitly refer to a beautiful form or shape.

- 19 Hence the Akkadian designation *šamhat*, the name of the harlot who seduced and civilized Gilgamesh’s later friend Enkidu (compare German *Freudenmädchen*).
- 20 This tendency to use diorite monoliths contrasts with the notion that humans are of composite nature. See Selz 2004 and Porter 2014.
- 21 The “Lady of Warka” (Warka head) was likely part of a composite divine figure, probably Inana.
- 22 See, for example, Reade 1979; Russell 1991, 1999; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011; Evans 2012, 2014; Crawford 2014.
- 23 For Egypt, see the collected articles in Baines 2007.
- 24 Scholars generally agree that in (classical) antiquity reading was predominantly an oral activity. For Rome: Vogt-Spira 1990; for Greek antiquity: Thomas 1992. See also Busch 2002.
- 25 This seems more important than the rather contingent overlap between some icons attested in the proto-cuneiform script (see Ross 2014).
- 26 The Standard of Ur, some 150 years older, certainly also concerns a historical victory.

PART III

MATERIALS, MEDIA, AND ARTISTIC ENVIRONMENTS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Statuary and Reliefs

Claudia E. Suter

Introduction: Terminology and Approaches

Statuary and *reliefs*, along with the term *sculpture*, under which they could be subsumed, are modern categories. They designate art historical genres defined in terms of form, with the aim of being objective. There are no equivalents for such categories in ancient Mesopotamia, the region of the ancient Near East on which this chapter focuses. The terms **alan**, **an-dul3**, and **šalmu**, which in accompanying inscriptions and other texts refer to anthropomorphic statues, designated more generally an “image” or a “manifestation.” They were also used as early as the Early Dynastic period to refer to anthropomorphic figures carved in relief (Waetzoldt 2000; Evans 2012: 112–15), and to aniconic Middle and Neo-Assyrian stelae (Feldman 2009: 46). The Stele of Hammurabi (Figure 16.1) refers to the image of the king and to the entire monument with the terms **šalmu** and **narû**, respectively: “Let a wronged man who has a legal case come before my image (depicting me as) king of justice, and let him have my inscribed stone monument read out loud; let him hear my precious pronouncements, let my stone monument reveal the case to him” (xlvi 3–17).¹ Mesopotamian stelae were largely royal monuments and ideal vehicles for self-representation, since they provided space for both extended visual narratives and long texts. The Akkadian term (**narû**) designating this image- and text-carrier is a loan from Sumerian **na(4)-ru2-a**, which literally means “erected stone.” In late second- and early first-millennium Babylonia, it was appropriated for stone boulders that record long-term, hereditary entitlements (Slanski 2003). Akkadian also knew a term for “representation,” **tamšilu**, which contained a notion of mimesis and referred not only to human and animal figures, but also to representations of inanimate objects (Berlejung 1998: 71–72; Bonatz and Heinz, this volume).



Figure 16.1 Stele of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE). Susa. Basalt; 2.25×0.65 m. Musée du Louvre AO Sb 8.

Photo: Franck Raux. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

The investigation of ancient Near Eastern civilizations began as a consequence of the European Enlightenment and a side effect of nineteenth-century colonialism (Trümpler 2008; Bahrani, Çelik, and Eldem 2011). While early travelers, mainly pilgrims to the Holy Land, visited the ancient ruins of Babylonia and Assyria whose memory the Bible had kept alive, it was only after the British East India Company established residence in Ottoman Mesopotamia that modern excavations began. *La Grande Nation* kept abreast with the British Empire. A main goal of the early excavators was to retrieve art objects for the newly founded European museums, with competition between the British Museum and the Louvre leading the way. From European interest in Near Eastern antiquities emerged a market and the production of fakes, not only leaving us with unrecorded excavations and unprovenanced artifacts, but also casting doubt on the authenticity of many objects in today's museums and private collections (Muscarella 2000).

With the entry of Germans into the league of early explorers, archaeological investigation became more scientific. They brought along architects who developed methods for tracing mudbrick architecture and introduced stratigraphic excavation. A main concern of twentieth-century research was to establish a framework for classifying the finds in terms of date and origin, a necessary precondition for further analyses. Another still ongoing concern is the search for meaning in retrieved images. Later in the same century, scholarly attention shifted to function, social context, and the artistic environment of sculpture and other works of art. Recent studies tackle such issues as gender, identity, and agency.

In general, students of the ancient Near East lag behind other social sciences in adopting new approaches to their material. Their comparatively young field is still in need of compilations and editions of primary data and general surveys. Moreover, since its objects of study are remote in time, and the record as a whole is also extremely fragmentary, many issues discussed in fields that treat modern or contemporary culture cannot be adequately addressed. While postmodern approaches have opened our eyes to overcoming a Eurocentric viewpoint and the nineteenth century's overly positivist perspective, their unmeasured use runs the risk of compromising thoughtful research.

The Objects: Type, Size, Material, Context, Findspot, Date, and Origin

Statuary sculpted in the round comprises human and divine anthropomorphic figures, animals, and mixed creatures (*Mischwesen*) (Spycket 1981). The statues can be freestanding or form part of other objects. Freestanding statuary

usually consists of single figures; groups are rare. In architectural contexts there are also figures sculpted nearly in the round, which can form pairs or rows. Works carved in relief include wall panels, stelae, boulders, door plaques, throne bases, altars, stands, vessels, and maceheads (Börker-Klähn 1982; Reade 1984; Seidl 1989; Braun-Holzinger 1991).

Differences in size can, but need not, depend on type, material, or function. Walls are naturally larger than throne bases or altars; stelae are generally larger than other freestanding objects carved in relief, yet their height varies from less than one to over three meters, which may in part have depended on available blocks of stone. Anthropomorphic statuary ranges from the size of a human hand to over-life-sized, while animals and mixed creatures range from miniatures to colossi. In the case of the latter, size is related to function: small formats are usually dedicatory gifts, while life-sized and colossal formats are guardian figures in architectural contexts, such as gate lions or human-faced bulls in Neo-Assyrian palaces.

With human figures sculpted in the round, size can imply rank, as Irene J. Winter (1984: 106) has suggested for “Abu” and his consort: at seventy-two and fifty-nine centimeters in height respectively, they are noticeably larger than all other statues of the Tell Asmar hoard. Life-sized and larger formats were reserved for rulers. The earliest example, a fragmentary head from Uruk, appears at the very beginning of urban civilization (Braun-Holzinger 2007: pl. 4). Life-sized and over-life-sized statues reappear with the Akkadian kings and with Gudea of Lagash, who has left us more stone effigies of himself than any other king (Figure 16.2). One of the largest examples is the fragmentary statue from Qadisiyah, perhaps the capital of Akkad, which must have been about three meters in height (Reade 2002: 262–69, no. 5)—a size unrivaled even by Neo-Assyrian kings. By Akkadian times, gender may have been another factor determining size: the surviving female statues never reach even close to life-sized. Not all statues of kings were large, however: the Shulgi statuette from Girsu, for example, measures little over twenty centimeters in height (Suter 2010: 322–23, fig. 3). Different formats may have had different uses. In the case of the substantial corpus of Gudea statues, the life-sized and larger exemplars were dedicated to the state’s major deities in the temple district, whereas the considerably smaller ones pertained to his personal god and consort in what was probably a palace chapel (Suter 2012).



Figure 16.2 Gudea, Statue N. Tello (ancient Girsu), ca. 2100 BCE. Calcite; 62 × 25.6 cm. Musée du Louvre AO 22126. Scala/Art Resource, NY.

Most surviving sculpture was carved from stone, which was no doubt chosen for its durability. Commonly used stones were gypsum and limestone; black

basalt was also employed. While these were available in Mesopotamia—limestone and basalt in the north, gypsum also in the south—others were imported, which naturally increased their value (Moorey 1994: 23–30). The best example is the hard black stone imported from either side of the Persian Gulf, which was called **na⁴esi** in Sumerian (Reade 2002). Gulf stone was used chiefly for royal monuments, and in their inscriptions kings specifically mention its import—the equivalent of announcing that they controlled important trade routes. Examples include late Early Dynastic statues from Lagash, practically all statues and stelae of the kings of Akkad, most Gudea statues, the Shulgi statuette from Ur, the seated statue of a late Ur III or Isin-Larsa king from Susa, and some royal women of the Lagash II to Isin-Larsa dynasties (Suter 2007: fig. 9; 2008: nos. St. 16, 20, 26–28). The Sumerian poem *Lugale*, which describes the god Ninurta’s “subjugation” and “domestication” of stones, underlines the significance of **na⁴esi** for royal monuments.

They shall bring you (**na⁴esi**) from the land of Magan.

You—Copper, the strong (tool), shall cut like leather.

I am the lord. May you be perfectly suited for my strength and heroism.

For the king, who establishes his name in remote days,

After he has made his image for the future, and

After he has set it up at the **ki-a-nag**

Of (the temple) Eninnu, the house full of joy,

May you be there as a fitting attribute. (ll. 472–78)²

Metal—gold, silver, copper and its alloys—was imported to Mesopotamia from Iran, Anatolia, Cyprus, and Oman; there was only a small metalliferous region in the Mosul area of northern Iraq. The surviving corpus of metal sculpture is modest not necessarily because metal was precious, but because it could easily be reused, a practice that texts confirm. Nevertheless, it is varied in object types, size, and imagery, and spans all of Mesopotamian history. One of the most impressive pieces is the lower body of a life-sized *lahmu*, which Naram-Sin of Akkad (2254–2218 BCE) commissioned, probably in multiple copies, to celebrate his self-deification after subduing the Great Revolt; it was cast using the lost-wax technique and weighs 160 kilograms. Other impressive works include the ensemble of animal statuary and reliefs from Tell Ubaid’s Ninhursag Temple, the lost-wax head of an Akkadian king from Nineveh, the pair of four-faced deities from Ischali, the lions from Mari’s Dagan Temple, and Neo-Assyrian relief fragments (Braun-Holzinger 1984).

Clay was the only material that was ubiquitous in Mesopotamia and therefore cheap, hence the industry of clay figurines and plaques that common people

offered *ex voto* in temples or used for devotion in their homes (Reade 2001–2; Wrede 2003). Yet fired clay was also used for architectural sculpture, such as life-sized gate lions or façades of Kassite and Neo-Babylonian buildings decorated with figures in relief (Orthmann 1975: pls. 167, 169, XXIV–XXVI). While manufacture of the lions required enormous ovens, the relief figures were composed of individual bricks. Wood- and ivorycarving, which share the same tools and techniques, had a tradition in the Levant and Syria, where the raw materials were more readily available than in Mesopotamia.

A characteristic feature of early Mesopotamian art was the combination of various materials in one object, which not only affected color but also signified prestige by incorporating precious imported materials. The eyes of most statues, especially those made from soft white stones, were inlaid in shell and semiprecious dark stones; some statues also had inlaid nipples or hair made separately from a dark stone. An Early Dynastic female figure from Nippur, made of translucent green stone, has a gold-plated face and inlaid eyes (Orthmann 1975: pl. II). One of the most spectacular composite statuettes is the pair of rampant goats flanking a rosette tree from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, which combines gold, silver, copper alloy, lapis lazuli, red limestone, and shell over a wooden core (Figure 16.3).



Figure 16.3 Goat (“Ram in the Thicket”). Ur, Royal Cemetery PG 1237; Early Dynastic IIIA (ca. 2500 BCE). Gold, silver, copper, shell, bitumen, and lapis; h. 42.6 cm. University Museum 30–12–702.

Courtesy of the Penn Museum, image no. 151000.

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the surviving record of statues and reliefs represents only a fraction of what once existed. Cult statues, for which there is ample evidence from late Early Dynastic times onward, are notoriously absent from the archaeological record (Renger and Seidl 1980–83; Berlejung 1998; Collon 2007; Maggio 2012). Royal inscriptions describe their

fashioning and consecration, and their abduction and retrieval; administrative texts attest to deliveries of material for their fabrication and maintenance, and regular offerings of food, bathing, and journeys. Deities are frequently depicted in images, usually in anthropomorphic form but also as symbols (Ornan 2009). Some representations especially in later periods, such as processions of Assyrian soldiers carrying away deities from defeated cities, clearly depict statues (see [Figure 14.3](#) in Downes, this volume). Cult statues have not survived because they were made of materials that either perished or were reused: precious metals hammered over a wooden core with semiprecious stone inlays, dressed in garments fashioned from textiles.

Deliveries of materials and descriptions recorded in administrative texts suggest that royal statues could be similar in composition, especially statues of deified kings. Royal women could also have statues made at least partly of metal. A survey of images of royal women from the Akkadian to the Isin-Larsa period shows that the surviving record of stone sculpture cannot be representative when compared with glyptic (Suter 2008). There must have been many more sculptures of perishable or reusable material; moreover, the sample of stone sculpture is uneven through time and space. The sole substantial bodies are Early Dynastic statuary and door plaques, Babylonian entitlement boulders, and Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs. Other surviving sculpture is scanty at best. Finally, few monuments have been recovered intact; more often, statues lack a head or body, and stelae come to light in fragments often difficult to reconstruct. The same problems of preservation apply to sculptural programs consisting of royal statues or stelae that were fashioned in series (Börker-Klähn 1982: 108–10; Eppihimer 2010).

Thus it is imperative to ask whether the data on which we base conclusions is likely to be representative. The extant sculpture of the Third Dynasty of Ur, for example, has led scholars to conclude that these kings were more peaceful than others and that visual media were more conservative than verbal media in propagating divine kingship. Neither conclusion is tenable when we consider texts describing now-lost monuments and the emulation of Ur III royal images by their epigones (Suter 2010). Like other kings, the Ur III dynasts set up victory monuments, and their images promoted their deification to the extent that in subsequent periods some became models for protective spirits.

What do the findspots of statues and reliefs tell us about their original setting? The answer is disappointing: except for sculpture bound with architecture, such as Kassite façade figures or Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, statues and reliefs have rarely ever been found in situ. Nearly all early Mesopotamian sculpture was discovered in secondary contexts. All Late Uruk sculpture came from hoards or fills; most Early Dynastic statues were found buried in hoards under temple floors; most Akkadian statues and stelae, as well as the Hammurabi Stele, came to light in Susa where they had been deported by Elamite kings; all Gudea statues from the temple district were found

reassembled in a Seleucid palace. A comprehensive study of this subject has yet to be written (Braun-Holzinger 1997 discusses deported records of Lagashite kings).

As a result, the chronological and geographical classification of sculpture—in contrast to utilitarian objects such as pottery—relies more often on inscribed texts and stylistic criteria than on stratigraphy. Even with the systematically excavated sculpture from the Diyala region and Nippur, stratigraphy can only provide *ante quem* dates for hoards. In the best circumstances, an accompanying text names a donor whom we can identify in time and space. When an inscription lacks the donor's name or other identifying clues, paleography can help in attributing an inscribed object to a specific time or place. But this method requires well-established data for comparison, which are not always available, especially for early periods (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 119).

Anonymous statues and reliefs can be attributed more or less precisely to a certain period and place by comparison with identified exemplars with which they share stylistic affinities. While we can observe stylistic trends typical of a period or place, postulating a progression toward greater realism—a common assumption in early twentieth-century scholarship—is an untenable construct grounded in the nineteenth century's belief in evolution and progress. The development from “geometric” to “naturalistic” that the Diyala excavators posited for Early Dynastic statuary, for example, was already undermined as excavations continued and subsequently proved inapplicable to other sites (Evans 2012: 73–75). While stylistic homogeneity can be expected in hegemonic states and empires, at least for official art produced under royal auspices, local styles thrived in times of competing city-states. Thus Edith Porada's (1956: 122; 1995: 139) assessment of the Diyala finds as a regional phenomenon seems more sensible than the widespread view that they represent the norm of Early Dynastic sculpture—a view no doubt prompted by the coincidence that the Diyala sites produced one of the largest samples of statuary and played a crucial role in establishing early Mesopotamian periodization.

Who/What is Depicted: Figures' Identity, Portraiture, Narratives

Inscriptions provide the key to identifying figures represented in sculpture. Statues and reliefs were inscribed from the beginning of the Early Dynastic period. At first inscribed works were only a minority, but by the end of that period and thereafter inscriptions became the norm. When a monument remains anonymous, it is usually due to its fragmentary condition. Among the

first monumental inscriptions are contracts or entitlements, the so-called ancient *kudurrus* (Gelb, Steinkeller, and Whiting 1991). Much more frequent were dedicatory texts, which identify the donor and the deity to whom the sculpture was dedicated (Braun-Holzinger 1991). In visual narratives carved in relief, captions can identify figures by name. This practice is first attested on the so-called Ushumgal Stele, on which the labeled figures coincide with individuals mentioned in the written contract.

Captions identify only human figures by name; deities and other supernatural beings are generally not labeled. While *Mischwesen* could be recognized by their distinctive form, the identity of anthropomorphic deities could only be inferred from an accompanying inscription or the sculpture's original setting. Attributes tend to characterize general aspects and seldom identify a specific deity (Braun-Holzinger 1996; Suter 2000: 257–60); weapons and lions, for example, were associated with multiple deities that had a warrior aspect. The scarcity of individualized attributes may be related to syncretism and the variety of local panthea.

Along with the depiction of anthropomorphic deities in visual imagery, an unequivocal marker was introduced to distinguish them from human figures. The horned crown functioned in images like the divine determinative in texts: it flagged divinity. Naram-Sin of Akkad, the first king who appropriated the divine determinative, had himself represented with a pair of horns on his helmet (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume). His horned helmet, however, differs in shape from the horned crowns of deities. In Mesopotamia, royal self-deification never went as far as it did in Egypt (Brisch 2008). Even when kings of Akkad and the Third Dynasty of Ur used the divine determinative and had temples built for their worship, their stone images did not differ significantly from royal images of other periods.

Whether deified or not, kings—and to some extent also the wives and daughters whom they installed as high priestesses—could share attributes or regalia with deities (Suter 2013: 219–20). Let me offer three examples. Early Dynastic kings and queens hold male and female date flowers in banquet scenes, just as enthroned deities do. From the Akkadian to the Isin-Larsa period, kings and high priestesses may wear flounced garments, which were standard for deities at that time. When polos- or tiara-shaped horned crowns began to appear, the royal headgear was very similar in shape, especially in Kassite Babylonia and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Kings of the human world mirrored kings of the divine world, and vice versa (Ornan 2009; Selz 2013).

Godlike features of royalty have often confused scholars, who debate the identity of many sculpted figures: human or divine? Some scholars have recently attempted to solve the problem by suggesting a deliberate ambiguity. But while royal hymns intentionally created an ambiguity of reference, visual images necessarily must give shape to figures. Godlike attributes of kings were always combined with other features that left no doubt about the figure's

identity, and must be understood in the context of royal ideology. Kingship was always sacred, since it was presented as god-given. Kings, and by extension their closest family members, represented the gods on earth. They were portrayed as “the primary nexus between heaven and earth: the lynchpin that allows the two realms to communicate with and sustain each other” (Machinist 2006: 186). Thus they always claimed divine status to some degree.

Dedicatory statues represent historical figures who are named in their inscriptions. Approaching them with Western notions of portraiture, some scholars have attempted to identify individual physiognomy and, in cases where multiple images of the same person survive, different age versions. Long ago, Eva Strommenger (1960) cautioned against confusing individual physiognomy with the style of a period; in her view, the “impersonal type” prevailed at all times in Mesopotamia. The only substantial study of portraiture in Mesopotamia restricts itself to the late third and early second millennium BCE and ends on an inconclusive note: “meaningful discussion of the interaction between cultural ideals, royal prerogatives, regional taste and fashion, and aesthetic concerns is impossible until more portraits can accurately be identified and dated” (Schlossman 1978–82: 170). Inspired by discussions of Egyptian statuary, Irene J. Winter (2009) proposes to introduce an intermediary category between portraiture and stereotype that she calls “signature element.” She develops her thesis exclusively with reference to Gudea’s statues, in which she sees the clear-cut chin as a “signature element,” while taking the muscular arm, large ears, and broad chest as stylistic traits signifying ideal rulership.

Winter’s “signature element” is difficult to substantiate, however. While most Gudea statues lack heads, the authenticity of several with preserved head is dubious, as are most isolated heads attributed to Gudea (Johansen 1978).

Anonymous Gudea-like statuary could equally well belong to other Lagash II rulers. A comparison of the provenanced Gudea Statue I (Johansen 1978: pls. 37–43) or Statue N (see Figure 16.2), the only one of the three Gudea statues carved from soft stones that I believe to be authentic, with that of his son Ur-Ningirsu (Johansen 1978: pls. 118–20) carved of soft stone, shows father and son sharing the same facial features. Such similarities also occur among the sculptures of other dynasties and are best understood as *Zeitsstil*, as Strommenger advised. In terms of material and carving, Gudea’s statues follow streams of tradition. Gulf stone signaled hegemonic claims. The blocklike appearance and beardlessness of his statues recall those of his Lagashite predecessors, whereas the more naturalistic proportions and musculature follow Akkadian models. As a novelty, Gudea introduced a new ceremonial royal attire, the brimmed cap combined with a fringed robe, which remained standard down to Hammurabi of Babylon.

Assyrian kings describe their images as possessing the “likeness of their

features” while simultaneously shaped by the gods and divine-like (Machinist 2006: 170–82). There is little discernible difference between one king and another, and their facial features are identical to those of genies and human-faced bull colossi. While the contemporaneous audience would have known from context and hearsay which king was depicted, future generations, including ours, can identify the figure portrayed only by means of an accompanying inscription. The portrayals are idealized. Obviously the Mesopotamian notion of portraiture differed from the common Western notion that joins it with naturalistically rendered physiognomy. When Assyrian kings announce that their images were intended to capture their essence, they must refer to their proclaimed godlikeness. Peter Machinist (2006) observes that while the king’s image (Akkadian *šalam šarri*) can be written with the divine determinative, individual kings’ names never were. The idealized royal image was tied to sacred kingship rather than to individual kings. The Assyrian king’s godlike depiction was enhanced by exclusiveness: at the time, practically only the king and gods were portrayed in statues and on stelae.

Visual narratives carved in relief pertain largely to royal ideology. Regardless of whether the imagery depicted cult or court ceremonies, temple building, military expeditions, or law promulgation, the primary ideological message conveyed that people’s prosperity and security depended on the ruler due to his relationship with the gods. In term of composition, visual narratives consist of a core that could be expanded with additional figures and details, as well as with additional scenes that juxtaposed successive episodes of a story, thereby giving more credibility to the primary ideological message (Suter 2000: 211–25).

The most detailed narrative of the Late Uruk period, carved on a tall stone jar, expressed the ruler’s role as mediator with the divine sphere even before deities were depicted (see Figure 11.1 in Collins and Figure 8.2 in Green, this volume). He is shown as the leader of human society, bringing agricultural surplus and gifts with the help of his subjects to the temple or storage of the goddess Inana. The procession of domesticated animals and food-bearers, which culminates in the ruler’s encounter with a prominent woman who stands at the entrance to Inana’s sacred space, may have simultaneously evoked a sumptuous celebration in real life; the ruler’s role as provider of the gods and of his people; and his role as procreator. Whatever the celebration—if indeed it was meant to be specific—it would have bolstered and at the same time secured his powerful status. The representation of cultivated grain and water below the procession indicates that the image does not represent a real-life event; these static motifs complete the ideal representation of the Late Uruk cosmos. The hallmark of the earlier Early Dynastic period was the royal banquet, which also evoked sumptuous celebrations that underlined the king’s superior status, his role as representative of the gods together with his wife,

and the concept of royal patronage (Figure 16.4).

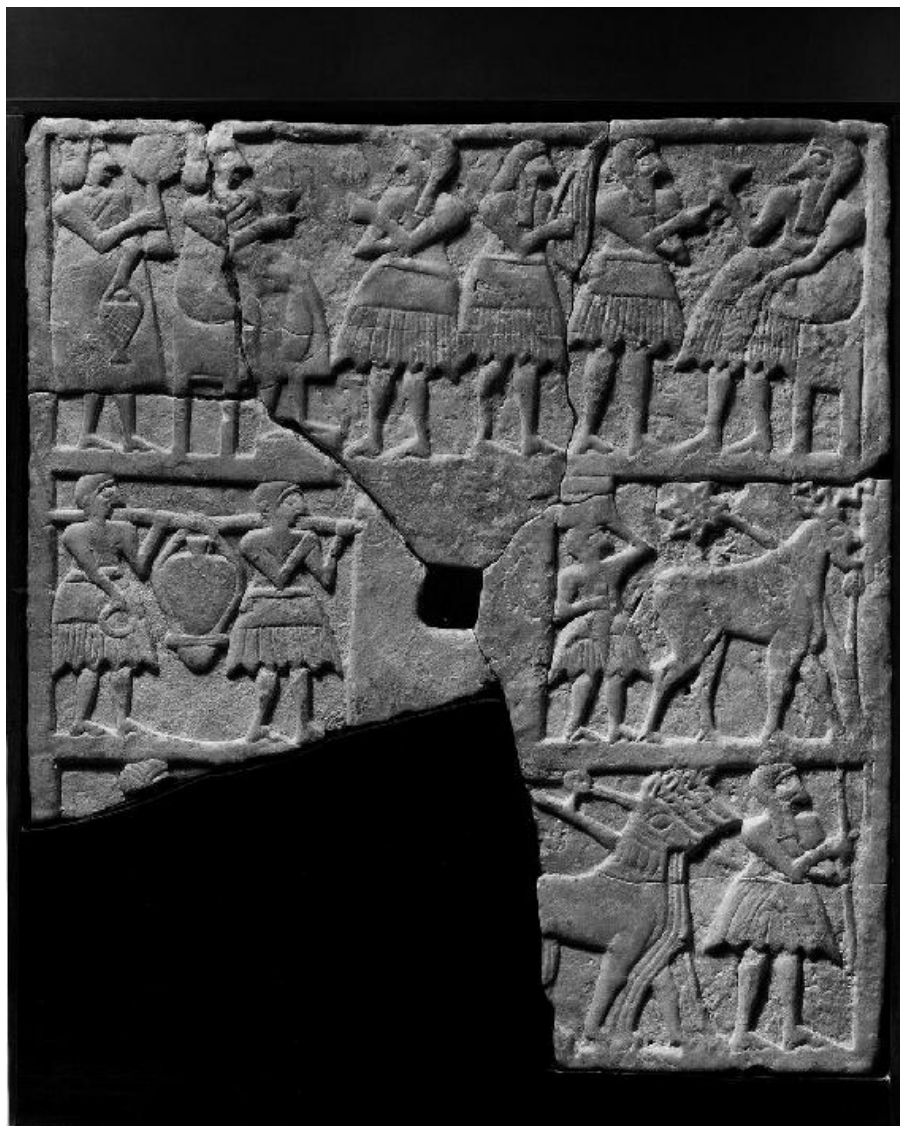


Figure 16.4 Door plaque. Khafajah; Early Dynastic II–IIIA (ca. 2750–2500 BCE). Limestone; 32 × 29.5 cm. Iraq Museum 14661. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

The so-called presentation scene that depicts the king standing before an enthroned deity first appears on the stelae of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash, which record his temple building (see Figure 12.4 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). We find it again on a victory stele of Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BCE), on which the king (or his alter ego in the form of his personal god) presents the goddess Ishtar with war captives caught in a large net (Börker-Klähn 1982: 129; pl. 19). The stelae of Gudea and Ur-Namma, which provide further

episodes of their temple building in lower registers, show these kings in the culminating top registers standing before enthroned deities who extend to them prosperity symbolized by overflowing water. Hammurabi of Babylon inscribed his Law Code on a stele at the summit of which he is depicted standing before an enthroned Shamash, god of justice, who extends to him the insignia of rulership (see [Figure 16.1](#)). Piotr Michalowski (1990: 62) put the latter's message succinctly: "The scene recapitulates in a single moment the primary ideological message of the 'codes': the concern for and the authority to dispense justice is a royal prerogative and it is divinely sanctioned." What applied to dispensing justice likewise applied to building temples or conducting wars. Michalowski (1990: 64) continued: "Stone stelae represent royal authority, and it is the combined effect of writing, symbolic imagery, and the very medium itself that work together to express certain concepts."

The Babylonian entitlement boulders depict either a figural scene that represents the entitlement recipient before his or her king or a series of divine symbols ([Figure 16.5](#)) (see also [Figure 3.1](#) in Nunn, this volume). The former can be understood as expressing authority and power relationships in parallel to the earlier presentation scenes, while the latter operated in tandem with the inscription's curses to protect and preserve the monument. The most extensive visual narratives of Mesopotamia are the Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs, the main theme of which was the king's military victories as a demonstration of his supreme power; they employ mainly episodic scenes and only a few conceptual ones. On all the inscribed monuments, image and text complement one another. Neither was dependent on the other; each medium had its own tradition (Winter 1985; Suter 2000; Cooper 2008).



Figure 16.5 Entitlement document (*narû*) of Meli-shipak (1186–1172 BCE). Susa; Kassite period. Limestone; 68 × 28 cm. Musée du Louvre AO Sb 22.

Photo: René-Gabriel Ojéda. © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

Who Made Sculpture for Whom: Artists, Patrons, Audiences

Unlike the Western and Western-influenced art that surrounds us today, Mesopotamian art was neither “for art’s sake” nor individualistic. Like all ancient art, it was bound with function and embedded in a social context. Whereas in ancient Greece individual artists begin to sign their work, Mesopotamian artists remained largely anonymous. Hans Belting (1990) has suggested that we speak of *images* rather than *art* for any such production before the Renaissance. Without dismissing the contribution of *Bildwissenschaften* to our perception of the symbolic, representative, and performative aspects of modern and premodern images, I side with those who find it hard to accept a definition of art that applies exclusively to a comparatively short-lived Western phenomenon. Both the Latin origin of the term (*ars*) and its Greek equivalent (*techne*) express skill rather than individualism. Although Mesopotamian languages lack a similar, general term for artistic production, there is ample evidence in cuneiform texts for the aesthetic appreciation of works of art, both sculpture and architecture, in which mastery, embellishment, and perfection play major roles (Winter 2002, 2003).

Little is known about Mesopotamian sculptors or artisans (Moorey 1994: 13–17; Matthews 1995; Renger 1996). They were perceived as practitioners of a specialized skill, like diviners or brewers. Their patron was Enki, god of wisdom and creation. In second-millennium Mari, such practitioners were called “sons of experts” (*mārē ummêni*). Crafts were passed from father to son, as in most traditional societies. The terms designating artisanal professions in Sumerian lexical lists classify them primarily by material, which may have corresponded to specialized workplaces. Unfortunately, excavations have thus far produced little evidence for workshops (Merluzzi 1997). Sculptors must be sought among carpenters, stoneworkers, silver- and goldsmiths, metalworkers, and statue/image makers, who probably collaborated on composite works. Temples and palaces ran their own artisan houses (*é-giš-kin-ti*), but there were also independent artisans who worked for institutions. The social standing of craftsmen ranged from citizens who were themselves donors of sculpted artifacts to slaves who ran away from disagreeable conditions. The sculptor’s influence on the message of his work must have been minimal, since he was bound by his patron’s demands. While some texts suggest that the material of which a sculpture was made was more valued than its execution, others also show appreciation for the latter. In the Late Bronze Age, craftsmen were exchanged, like luxury items, between courts of different countries (Zaccagnini 1983).

Who commissioned sculpture? The largest in size—stelae and architectural sculpture—were reserved for kings. Kings claim personal involvement in the creation of their monuments. Gudea describes how he imported stone, made seven stelae, and consecrated them in the temple he built (Cylinder A 22:24–24:7); similar accounts of resource provision, fabrication, and consecration occur in his statue inscriptions (Edzard 1997). The king is usually styled as agent, although in the longest temple-building account, Gudea recounts having sat together with artisans after importing stones, metals, and woods from around the world, upon which follows a metaphorical description of their work (Cylinder A 15:4?–17:4?).³ Neo-Assyrian royal involvement is documented in correspondence in which small details such as the king’s garment or the proper positioning of the scepter in his image are discussed (Cole and Machinist 1998: xiii–xiv). Sennacherib was even depicted in a wall relief, supervising the quarrying of stone for colossal guardian figures destined for his palace in Nineveh (Figure 16.6). These kings were guided by a host of advisors, some of whom oversaw the planning and execution of royal sculpture. Earlier kings must also have had advisors, albeit on a smaller scale.

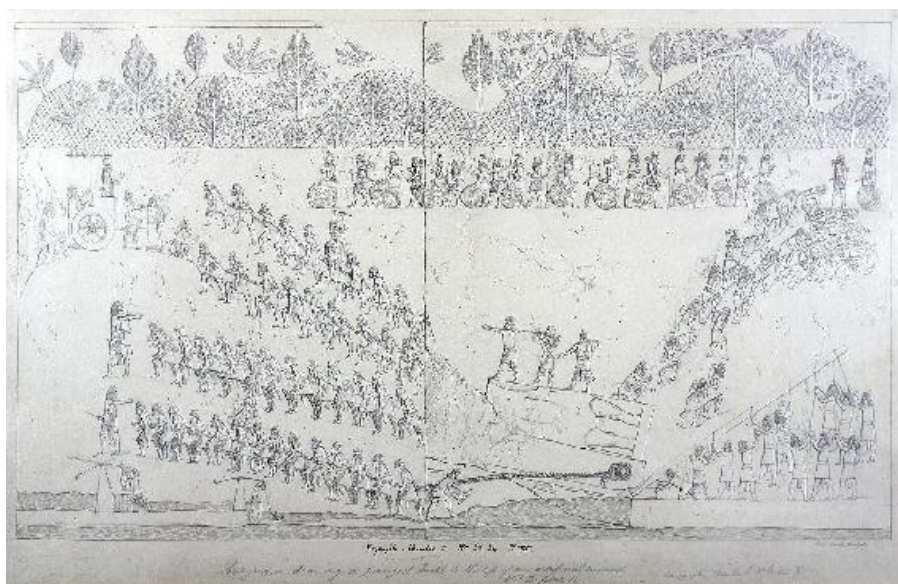


Figure 16.6 Drawing of Court VI, slabs 63–64, Sennacherib’s palace, Nineveh. Austen Henry Layard, *Original Drawings*, I, 57.

British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Whereas patronage of royal sculpture is relatively straightforward, this is not the case with nonroyal sculpture. Early Dynastic to Old Babylonian dedicatory sculptures identify their donors in their inscriptions. Early Dynastic donors represent the elite at large, but from the Akkadian period onward the principal donor was the king. The comparatively few remaining donors were

affiliated with the crown either through kinship or position; their inscriptions usually include the king in their wish for a long life. It is generally assumed that donors were identical with patrons. Zainab Bahrani (2001: 97–109) questioned this assumption with respect to royal women. Here the question is how much agency we entrust to the female gender, an issue on which scholarly opinion diverges. Bahrani's question is justified when royal women lived in harems or when princesses were turned into signs of royal power and prestige (Melville 2005; Michalowski 2010). The prominence of the Assyrian queen mother Naqia/Zakutu, for example, seems to have been shrewdly plotted by her son Esarhaddon in order to avoid problems in the royal succession (Melville 1999).

In the same vein, we may question whether all nonroyal men who dedicated sculptures for a king's life were the patrons of their donations or whether the crown might have been the ultimate source of some of them. Candidates for royal patronage include Gudea Statue R and the statue of Shulgi-kiursagkalama (Civil and Zettler 1989). In addition to the usual dedication, they record the king's grant of privileges and land to the donor or the artisans of the Nindara Temple, who must have been related to the donor. In both cases the statue may have represented the king rather than the donor, counter to usual practice. The identity of the high-quality, partly gilded metal statue that Lu-Nanna dedicated to Martu for Hammurabi's life has also been debated (Braun-Holzinger 1984: no. 192). Conversely, if these men belonged to the entourage that advised the king in creating royal monuments, then they would not only have stood behind the royal image but probably also commissioned their own dedications, eager to have their names remembered alongside those of kings. Dedicatory sculpture does not reveal power structures.

The Babylonian entitlement boulders (*narûs*) present a case in which chiefly nonroyal individuals—the recipients of the entitlements—appropriated a traditionally royal form of monument, albeit smaller in scale, and adapted it to their needs. Kathryn Slanski (2003) explains this phenomenon through social changes. By contrast, Neo-Assyrian sculpture was almost exclusively a royal prerogative. The rare exceptions, such as a few stelae of provincial governors during periods of weak kingship (Börker-Klähn 1982: nos. 231–33), confirm the general rule.

The audience of imperial Assyrian sculptures can more easily be determined than that of earlier sculpture, because their original setting is known. John Russell (1991: 223–40) lists twelve groups who demonstrably had access to Assyrian palaces and could have seen the reliefs. They range from the royal family, their entourage and servants, to the people of Assyria, foreign prisoners and envoys, and future kings and gods. For the audience of royal inscriptions, many of which were carved on reliefs, Mario Liverani (1995: 2354–55) distinguishes four groups: (1) a primary inner audience consisting of palace officials, priests, courtiers, and administrative personnel, all literate

and the only ones who needed to understand the text in all its details; (2) a secondary inner audience of free, male, adult Assyrians, who gained access to the contents of the message through oral transmission, ceremonial staging, and iconic representation, and who were targeted for purposes of mobilization and loyalty; (3) an outer audience of women and villagers, who needed to know only the basic message that the king lived in an impressive palace, was beloved by the gods, and ensured their well-being by establishing justice and protecting borders through military force; and (4) a foreign audience composed of actual and potential enemies, who needed to be impressed or intimidated by the king's power.

By contrast, scarcely any early Mesopotamian statues and reliefs were found in their original location. Their customary dedication to a deity suggests that they stood in temples; some inscriptions specifically mention the sculpture's entrance into a particular temple. Babylonian entitlement boulders also stood in temples. The problem is that we lack firsthand sources on who had access to temples: was it the population at large, the elite, or only a small circle of the elite who profited from temple prebends (aside from temple personnel), as Michalowski (2013: 174–75) suggests? Dedicatory inscriptions address only the gods and future generations, kings in particular. Can we trust Hammurabi's invitation to his subjects to come before his stele (or stelae) to claim their right, or is this merely rhetoric?

I suspect that there was a difference in visibility between indoor and outdoor spaces of temple compounds. Whereas cult statues, cult objects or gifts to the gods (vessels, stands, maceheads, etc.), and some statuary representing historical individuals in all probability stood indoors, at least some royal statues and stelae are known to have stood in courtyards. Cult statues may have been seen only when they were taken out for processions. The objective of donors whose dedications stood indoors may have been merely to be in good standing with the divine world and remembered by future generations. Yet, royal monuments set up in outdoor spaces must also have been intended to impress a contemporary audience. Their imagery was intelligible at least to the educated class and state employees familiar with glyptic images, if not also to others. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to presume, with both Liverani and Michalowski, that monumental architecture and performances in the form of splendid celebrations were more effective media for royal propaganda than was sculpture.

Sculptures' Lives: Consecration, Maintenance, Maltreatment

In Mesopotamia, divine and royal statues were imbued with life and partook

of sanctity. Angelika Berlejung (1998: 80–283) describes the fashioning and consecration of cult images in first-millennium Assyria. As with temple building, their fashioning was presented as a divine decision: time and place were determined by divination. The king was the patron. After fabrication, the artisans' hands had to be ritually severed to divorce them from their work. Consecration rituals included a mouth-washing for purification and a mouth-opening for animating the statue, that is, activating its agency (Walker and Dick 2001). Although there are no comparable written sources for early Mesopotamia, statue inscriptions—those of Gudea in particular—together with Ur III administrative texts suggest that these rituals had a long history and were also applied to royal statues (Winter 1992; 2000). Both divine and royal statues were “given birth” rather than “being made.” An important component in consecrating early Mesopotamian royal statues was to give them a name, which provided them with an identity (Radner 2005). Statue inscriptions could include a message that the statue was to transmit on behalf of its donor to the deity in the temple where it was set up. Thus dedicatory statues acted as intermediaries between the donor and the divine.

A few statue inscriptions of Lagash II and Ur III kings include prescriptions for regular offerings that would guarantee the statue's future maintenance (Radner 2005: 60; Zettler and Sallaberger 2011: 14); royal offering funds are assumed to have been common practice. Offerings for Early Dynastic statues are confined to kings and queens of Lagash (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 230–36). Texts of the Ur III period attest that divine and royal statues received offerings, were bathed, and taken out for processions (Ozaki 2008). While divine statues are simply referred to with the deity's name, royal statues are designated as statues of *a* or *the* king or queen; the same is true in Old Babylonian times (Maggio 2012: 131, 149). Presumably because offerings to deities do not mention their statues, offerings to ancestors that make no mention of a statue are frequently also assumed to refer to statues. Whether the funerary cult can be coalesced with the cult of the surviving stone and metal statues, however, remains an unresolved problem (Selz 2005; Braun-Holzinger 2007: 45–46, 130–31; Katz 2008; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 149 n. 96; Evans 2012: 131–37). If funerary offerings were made to statues, those statues may have been of a different kind. At the same time, there may have been variations in kind and custom depending on rank, region, and changing socio-political structures.

While it is clear that Mesopotamian royal statues could be votive and venerated at the same time (Winter 1992, 2007; Machinist 2006), Bahrani's suggestion (2003: 149–84) that they were uncanny doubles or substitutes of the king takes the issue too far. Royal statues were not magical figurines, nor could they rule, marry, or lead an army (Porter 2009: 207–10). Stelae, too, received names and offerings. But they were never “given birth” or messages to deliver, they were “set up” in the temple, like inanimate objects, and they

were never associated with historical individuals in offering lists.

The most telling evidence for the lives of Mesopotamian statues and royal monuments carved in relief are the curses in their inscriptions that were intended to prevent *damnatio memoriae* by erasing their donor's name, appropriations, abductions, mutilations, or destructions (Feldman 2009; May 2012). Mutilated monuments, monuments found deported to enemy cities, and royal reports of abductions and repatriation of divine and royal images confirm that the fear expressed in these curses was real. It also suggests that what was meant by the wish for a long life of the donor expressed in so many inscriptions, was, in fact, a wish for eternal remembrance. Copies of inscriptions by later generations and reports of abductions and repatriations reveal that some Mesopotamian cult images and royal monuments stood on display for centuries, even if with occasional interruptions. The image ban of monotheistic religions is a clear answer to their inherent power.

Conclusions

Mesopotamian sculpture stood in the service of the ruling power. Statues and reliefs were commissioned by rulers and their entourage; monumental exemplars were a prerogative of kings. The surviving record is very spotty and largely made of stone. Whereas most third- and second-millennium sculpture was dedicated to deities and set up in temples, most first-millennium sculpture decorated royal palaces. Statues represented gods, supernatural genies, kings, and elite persons; they could be ritually animated and provided with regular offerings. Reliefs depicted scenes that conveyed the power's superiority and authority due to the king's close relationship with the divine world. Main incentives for the fabrication of sculpture included the donor's wishes for divine blessing and remembrance by future generations, thus circumventing the inescapable termination of human life. In the case of monumental sculpture, there was no doubt also an element of political propaganda. While monumental architecture and live performances of pompous celebrations were certainly more effective in this respect, physical images were icons of power. This explains abductions and repatriations of statues and stelae, and deliberately inflicted damage to sculpture.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Orthmann 1975 offers a well-illustrated general compendium. Recent exhibition catalogues, such as Aruz with Wallenfels 2003, provide high-quality color illustrations. Catalogues and analyses of specific groups of

sculpture include Börker-Klähn 1982; Braun-Holzinger 1977, 1984, 1991; Reade 1984; Seidl 1989; and Spycket 1981. Moorey 1994 superbly surveys materials and discusses techniques of fabrication. Gunter 1990 provides an excellent introduction to artistic environments. Studies that raise intriguing questions regarding the appearance and function of sculpture include Berlejung 1998, Winter 2010, Evans 2012, and May 2012.

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NOTES

1. For a text edition, see Roth 1995: 134.
2. This passage is discussed by Selz 2001: 390.
3. Because there are lacunae in the text, it is not clear precisely where the passage begins and ends (hence the question marks).

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Glyptic

Adelheid Otto

Introduction

In ancient Near Eastern studies, the term glyptic, derived from Greek *glyphein* (to engrave, to carve), exclusively designates carved seals whose designs were engraved on the material in reverse and appeared in relief when the seal was impressed on soft material, most often clay. There were two basic types of seals: stamp seals and cylinder seals, or, rarely, a combination of the two. Stamp seals were in continuous use from the seventh millennium BCE until the Seleucid period and even later; in fact, they are still in use today. Usually one flat or slightly convex side bears a carved design, while the other side can be shaped as a knob, cone, scarab, or other animal.

A cylinder seal is a small cylindrical artifact into whose convex matrix the design was engraved, enabling an endless band of images to be produced. From the mid-fourth millennium BCE onward, the cylinder seal progressively replaced the stamp seal in Mesopotamia, Syria, and western Iran, while in other regions of the Near East (such as Palestine or the Iranian plateau) stamps continued to be used. The cylinder found its way to these regions only during periods of intensive economic and political exchange with Mesopotamia, for example, in Anatolia during the Old Assyrian Colony period in the early second millennium BCE.

Why did the cylinder seal replace the stamp seal? One theory argues that rolling was faster than impressing, and therefore better suited to covering large surfaces. The essential advantage, however, was probably that the cylinder could accommodate more information on its surface. As a result, it was favored during the emergence of urban civilization in the later fourth millennium, when an increasingly sophisticated administration required complex and efficient information storage.

While the cylinder was the predominant seal type in Mesopotamia during the third and second millennia, it was increasingly supplanted by the stamp type during the first millennium, probably because many scribes were of Aramaean origin and thus more familiar with the stamp. Near Eastern seals also prompted the manufacture of cylinder and stamp seals in Egypt during the fourth millennium, in Greece in the third millennium, and in Crete, the Gulf region, and Central Asia in the second millennium BCE.

Material, Form, and Size

By far the most seals of any type were made from stone. Limestone, steatite, serpentine, chlorite and jasper, lapis lazuli and rock crystal were the preferred stones in the fourth and third millennia, but the core of large marine shells, with a dense surface and attractive ivory color, was also popular. The development of improved tools between the fourth and first millennium allowed the use of increasingly hard materials. Fairly hard iron oxides (hematite, goethite, magnetite, limonite) of dark color and an attractive luster were favored in the early second millennium. From the sixteenth century BCE onward, faience—a composite material consisting of a sintered quartz body and a glaze—often replaced stone. This material was easy to produce in every desired color, and was therefore preferred particularly for mass-producing inexpensive seals, especially for private individuals. During the first millennium, attractively speckled semiprecious stones or varieties of quartz (chalcedony, agate), often translucent, prevailed. Certain materials undoubtedly represented prestige, especially eye-catchingly colored and exotic ones such as blue lapis lazuli or red carnelian, which had to be imported from regions as far as modern Afghanistan and Pakistan (Figure 17.1). Metal seals were extremely rare, as were seals made from bone and ivory. Wooden seals also existed, but have hardly ever been preserved in the Near East, in contrast to multiple specimens from Egypt.



Figure 17.1 Cylinder seal inscribed for Ginadu, official of King Inshushinak-shar-ilani of Susa, and modern impression. Lapis lazuli and gold; 2.1 × 1.1 cm. Iran, Haft Tappeh; Middle Elamite (fourteenth century BCE). H. T. 10–32–26. From B. Mofidi-Nasrabadi, “The Grave of a *puhu-teppu* from Haft Tappeh,” *Akkadica* 132 (2011): 151–6, fig. 6.

Photograph courtesy of Behzad Mofidi-Nasrabadi.

If a legal transaction required the use of a seal when none was available, a seal was made impromptu from clay. Some of these so-called *burgul* seals (named for the seal-carver, Sumerian **burgul**) lack an image, bearing only the name of

the person involved in the transaction (Al-Gailani Werr 1988). Others were crudely adorned with sticklike figures, carelessly scratched and drilled into the soft clay; the simplest clay seals were decorated only with imprints of fingernails. Some of these “one-way” seals were apparently thrown away after use, as the relatively large number of original clay seals found in excavations indicates. Impressions of these seals demonstrate that they actually served administrative purposes and were not simply decorated beads (Otto 2004: 159, pls. 94–100, for examples from the Old Babylonian palace at Tuttul).

Cylinder seals vary in length between 0.5 and 7 cm, but are typically between 1.5 and 3 cm long; the length of stamp seals varies between 1 and 10 cm. Seals were furnished with fixtures enabling them to be worn: the cylinders were usually pierced along the axis or a suspension loop was added. The seal was attached to a string or wire and worn around the wrist or neck, rarely around the finger, or suspended from a pin that secured the garment. This practice is known from a few representations and from the evidence of graves, where in some cases seals were found near the head or arm of the deceased.

A few cylinder seals were decorated with metal caps, that is, plain or decorated sheets of metal, chiefly gold, which frequently overlapped the edge of the cylinder and thus obscured part of the image (see Figure 17.1). These metal caps had a double effect: they marked the visible cylinder immediately as especially valuable, and they left deep grooves in the clay, thus testifying to the value of the seal even on sealings. In both ways, the seal’s owner was immediately identifiable as a high-ranking person. In fact, the salient features of seals belonging to high-ranking individuals were less a particularly original image or exquisite style, but instead their size and above all their gold settings—further evidence that ancient criteria for evaluating a work of art differed from modern ones. The significance of the caps as a marker of status and prestige was so well known that attempts were made to imitate caps by cutting horizontal bands with triangles and other designs along the cylinder’s upper and lower edge, or by impressing the back of a knife in the soft clay to achieve the effect of a precious setting (Matthews 1990: 64–66).

Sealings: How Seals Were Used

Even today original seals are attractive miniature artistic masterpieces, but only sealings—pieces of clay on which the seals had been impressed or rolled—tell us about their use (Frangipane 2007; Otto 2010). Interest in the reverse side of the sealings began only in the 1970s, when Enrica Fiandra (1975) recognized that their analysis permitted deep insight into administrative and social processes. Lumps of clay were either directly attached to containers (jars, sacks, boxes, baskets, bales) by closing the mouth of a jar or by enclosing the tie fastening of a sack, or by hanging them as a label on the cord

that was wrapped around a good. In fairly large administrative units, such as palaces or temples, whole rooms (especially storage rooms) were often sealed instead of the individual goods that were kept inside. The doors were sealed by tying the door leaf to a plug in the wall with a cord. A lump of clay was then pressed around the knotted cord and sealed. While the sealing offered no protection against burglary, if undisturbed it did affirm that no unauthorized persons had entered the room.

Knowing which objects were sealed is important not only for those interested in social and administrative processes; for art historians it is equally crucial to analyze the reverse side of the sealings. Since a door sealing was certainly locally made, it shows that the seal was used on-site—if not necessarily created there. If a series of door sealings repeatedly shows similar designs or style, it strongly suggests that they were produced nearby, and forms the most reliable way to define local or regional seal groups. On the other hand, container sealings could in principle have been produced on-site; alternatively, the containers could have been sealed elsewhere and then imported to the site. In this case, other criteria help distinguish between imported and local sealings. Locally mined clays exhibit similarities that can be determined through chemical analysis, and differ clearly from the clay of alien sealings. The seal image itself provides no reliable information on the origin of the sealing, because seals were often used far from the place they were produced. If a certain seal image occurs only once or in a few examples within a large corpus of sealings, however, it may have been imported; this is undoubtedly the case when additionally other features such as clay or type differ from those locally known.

Cuneiform tablets or their envelopes, mainly letters and administrative or legal documents, were also sealed ([Figure 17.2](#)). Letters were sealed by the sender, while contracts, treaties, and other administrative tablets were sealed by the seller or lender, debtor, guarantor, tenant, claimant, recipient, the contracting parties, or one or several witnesses. Sealings on documents recording legal transaction had very much the same function as the signatures of the involved parties today.



Figure 17.2 Clay tablet inscribed with cuneiform text and partial impression of dynastic seal of King Abban (ca. 1700 BCE). Tell Atchana (ancient Alalakh), reign of Niqmepa (ca. 1450 BCE). H. original seal (with caps) ca. 2.4 cm.

British Museum ME 131467. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Ceramic containers and so-called models of wagons and beds were only rarely sealed—before firing, of course. In some cases, especially if the sealing covered a large part of the container's surface, the sealing will have had only an ornamental function. In other instances, the sealing might have been applied for administrative purposes, such as to identify the sender or the container's contents (Mazzoni 1992).

In general, ancient seal impressions seldom show all the details of a seal and are thus less valuable than original seals for art historical study. But they do allow a precise analysis of administrative processes and the associated responsibilities of administrative units and individual officials. Moreover, sealings that were certainly imported permit conclusions about the long-distance contacts of the respective administrative unit—always provided that the seal was used to seal goods at its place of its origin and not elsewhere. In

the palace of Tuttul, for example, a vast quantity of broken sealings was found in a room directly next to the entrance. Sealings on baskets, sacks, and boxes bearing seal images from Anatolia, southern Mesopotamia, and Assyria had obviously been delivered to the palace from distant regions. In this control room, several persons were apparently responsible for receiving the goods. They broke open the transport sealings, examined the merchandise, transferred it to other containers, sealed them with their official seals (which identify them as “servant of King Shamshi-Adad” or “servant of King Yasmakh-Adad”), then had them transported to and arranged in the storage rooms (Otto 2004: 150–56, pl. 35). From the contemporaneous “Grand Palais” at Mari we know a great deal about the (clearly regulated) responsibilities of those persons authorized to seal at the Royal Court. For instance, one text reports that not even a sack of wool sealed by the king could be opened by anyone other than the king himself or his wife (Biot and Burke 1964: no. 10).

Purpose and Importance of Seals in Antiquity and Today

In antiquity, seals served myriad purposes. As already mentioned, seals served as judicial tools to mark property or signal affiliation with special administrative units. They did not protect against abuse or burglary—it was not difficult to break open a sealed room or container of merchandise and take possession of its contents—but they did guarantee that the sealed object was intact. The amuletic character of seals was also highly important. Worn directly on the body, the seal or its carved designs protected its owner. It is not surprising, therefore, that gods or positive, apotropaic spirits were frequent subjects of seal designs and that negative elements or scenes were never depicted. In addition, seals revealed a lot about a person’s social status.

The value of seals in antiquity also derived from their long lives, which even extended over several centuries: they could be passed on from one generation to the next and used as a dynastic seal, transported over hundreds of kilometers, and kept as exotica far from their place of origin. In regions where seals were less common, people could continue to use old seals either by recarving them or simply leaving them unaltered. In the Old Assyrian colonies in Anatolia, for example, approximately 10 percent of the seal images were produced with seals originating from distant Babylonia, which in some cases were already several centuries old (Teissier 1994: 61–65). In various places in Syria and northern Mesopotamia, too, about a third of the seal impressions were already “antiques” at the time they were used. In Munbaqa, a settlement on the Upper Euphrates River in Syria, twenty-one of the seventy-one seals impressed on tablets of the fourteenth century were considerably older. The

seal of the town god even dated to the Akkadian period, thus at the time of its impression it was already a thousand years old (Werner 2004). It seems as if the elites of a community in particular preferred old seals, perhaps because they were able to produce a long line of ancestors—or wished to suggest it.

The value of seals for a modern understanding of ancient Near Eastern art cannot be overestimated. Since seals were abundant, small, stable, and almost indestructible, thousands have survived. Seals are the only medium of ancient Near Eastern pictorial art exhibiting an uninterrupted development from the fourth to the first millennium. In addition, they are extremely valuable in excavations, since they can be dated more precisely than pottery or any other finds, except for dated written documents. Unfortunately, seals are often discovered in illegal excavations and—because small and easy to transport—end up in collections all over the world. Under these circumstances, essential information gets irretrievably lost. Another consequence of the high value of seals today is that the majority of seals offered on the art market are in fact forgeries.

Seals as the Mass Media of Antiquity

The relationship of seals to large-scale monuments is not always evident, since only a few seals are carved with narrative scenes comparable to those found on reliefs, stelae, or wall paintings. More often, seals exhibit emblematic designs that transmit an encoded message. Yet some seals bear scenes markedly similar to those on large-scale monuments, demonstrating a close relationship between the different media during certain periods. For instance, the motif of the king as a worshiper standing opposite an enthroned god who holds a rod and ring appears almost identically on the famous Hammurabi Law Code (see [Figure 16.1](#) in Suter, this volume), and on the seal of the powerful contemporaneous ruler of northern Mesopotamia, Shamshi-Adad.

Seals were an excellent means of disseminating pictorial motifs and ideas, since they were small and easy to transport, and every legal entity possessed one. For this reason, seals were deliberately used to circulate the royal image and, thus, to propagate royal ideology in the second millennium BCE. Even if images of the most important royal aspects were erected at selected places in the empire in the form of stelae or statues, the question remains how the illustrated royal ideology could become known beyond these places, since the sphere of influence of stationary works of art was naturally restricted.

In this context, seals played an important role, since they disseminated over vast areas the specific concept of kingship of a particular ruler. Indeed, royal seals from the region of Mesopotamia and Syria exhibit a strikingly uniform

repertoire of themes and motives. In the period from the mid-third until the early first millennium, most depicted the king himself in a few predetermined ways that obviously showed his most important aspects. As a pious ruler, he approaches a deity in adoration or brings offerings. As an eternally victorious warrior—a pose dating to the Akkadian king Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BCE), which appeared on seals for the first time in the nineteenth century BCE—the king is armed and active, as expressed by his wind-blown beard and short kilt. With a few exceptions, the only other motifs on royal seals were animal contest scenes, where the protagonists were either heroes or genies ([Figure 17.3](#)) or, in the first millennium, the king himself ([Figure 17.4](#)). The enormously important role of the king as protector of law and order was apparently expressed not only through the metaphor of a “shepherd” in cuneiform texts, but also through visual images. In the third and second millennia, however, this abstract aspect was transposed to a supernatural level. The extremely popular scene of the protective genies *lahmu* (depicted as a human-like hero with tightly curled hair) and *kusarikku* (a bull-man), who defeat the wild animals (see [Figure 17.3](#)), may therefore be understood as a metaphor for instituting law and order and the victory over chaos (Otto [2013](#)).



Figure 17.3 Cylinder seal and modern impression: contest scene. Provenance unknown; Early Dynastic (ca. 2500 BCE). Aragonite; 4.3 cm.

British Museum ME 89538. © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 17.4 Stamp seal and modern impression: Achaemenid royal hero as master of animals. Provenance unknown; Achaemenid period (ca. 550–330 BCE). Agate; 3.1 × dia. base 2.5 cm.

British Museum ME 89891. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The iconography of gods and demons must also have been diffused via the minor arts, especially seals. How could we otherwise explain how these beings exhibit identical attributes, dress, and poses in places in the Near East that are hundreds of kilometers apart? Equally, without seals we can scarcely account for the preservation of motifs over long periods when they were not depicted. For instance, many glyptic designs used in the Akkadian period completely disappeared from the repertoire of pictorial art in the following Ur III period, but reappeared in Old Babylonian glyptic after an interval of about two hundred years. Since seals were passed from father to son and in some cases remained in use for centuries, they were an ideal means for preserving an enduring tradition of motifs. Thus, the thesis that seals must have served as *the* mass media of the ancient Near East—in an era when there were few means of disseminating images and the mobility of most people was restricted—seems to be justified.

Private Seals vs. Institutional or Group Seals

According to the Greek author Herodotus (*Histories* I.195), “every man” in Babylonia owned a seal. He was probably not far wrong in this statement, for at least every “legal person,” female or male, possessed at least one seal, which was used within the framework of legal procedures. We would in fact expect that seal images were intended to differ from one another in design and inscription, since their purpose was to guarantee the intactness of objects in

the name of a specific, identifiable person, or to verify legal actions.

Yet hundreds of seals now dispersed all over the world show strikingly similar images—and what has survived is only a fraction of what once existed. If we meticulously compared the seal images that have been carefully impressed using modern, fine-grained material, we would observe only minor deviations among individual seals. But in ancient times, seals were often carelessly impressed on clay that had already become too hard or that contained impurities, so that in many cases only part of the image and no details were visible. Today it often takes several days for archaeologists to generate a composite drawing of the entire seal image from the tiny fragments of ancient seal impressions ([Figure 17.5](#)). So how was it possible in antiquity to identify a seal impression as the signature of a specific person?

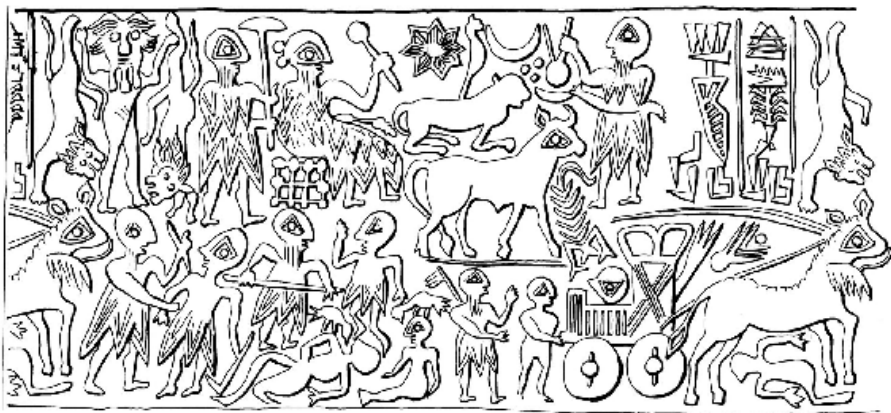


Figure 17.5 Composite drawing, Seal 1 of King Ishgi-Mari of Mari (ca. 2300 BCE). Drawing by Dominique Beyer from multiple seal impressions found in the palace at Mari.

Courtesy of Dominique Beyer.

There are three answers to this question. First, the act of sealing was often more important than the image impressed, as demonstrated by seal substitutes in the form of garment hems, fingernails, or shells. Second, many seals were impressed so that only the inscription with the owner's name was visible and only a small part of the seal image was preserved on either side of the inscription (see [Figure 17.2](#)). Thus, there was no need for the images to differ. Finally, the similarity of the images was often intended, as the following discussion explains.

Royalty and other high-ranking persons were allowed to own two or more seals simultaneously. The seal of the Neo-Assyrian king—a stamp with a fairly simple device of the king stabbing an upright standing lion—is known in 104 variations on documents from Nineveh alone (Herbordt [1992](#)). These documents date from the ninth to seventh centuries BCE, demonstrating that this was no personal seal of the king, but the royal Assyrian office seal, for

official state use by a multiplicity of individuals, and in use as far afield as Samaria (Winter 2000: 57). A similar situation can be assumed for earlier periods, since a systematic examination of royal seals shows that many kings from the third and second millennia likewise possessed more than one seal, which often differed little from one another (Otto 2013). For example, King Zimri-Lim of Mari (1776–1760 BCE) owned at least five seals, all of which depicted the king holding a mace standing opposite a suppliant goddess. They were probably also used as office seals, for most of the seals of high-ranking officials who served Zimri-Lim bore the same design. Clearly, there was an “official” design whose use was mandatory for members of the dynasty and the royal apparatus, but forbidden to private persons outside the royal sphere (Otto 2004: 175). The devices of official seals often seem to have become a kind of coat of arms. When documents with such an emblem were sent all over the world, the sealed images decisively contributed to promoting the visual royal ideology.

Thus the similarity of many seals was clearly intentional, to identify the individual seal owner immediately as part of a certain political, administrative, economic, or social unit. This phenomenon is attested for the first time on sealings from the Neolithic Burnt Village at Tell Sabi Abyad, in Syria, around 6000 BCE, where several sets of similar stamp seals were probably used by various members of different households, families, clans, or other entities, to mark their collective property (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997). There is also evidence for manifold variations of similar seals for the Late Uruk period. The design with two interlooped snakes and birds, for example, varies among the individual seals either in the number of birds or the direction they face (Boehmer 1999). The findspots of sealings in the Eanna precinct at Uruk, associated with lists of professionals, suggest that individual members of an administrative unit used the seal variants.

Even collective institutions such as the “Elders,” the “Brothers,” the merchant community, or the “Town,” were allowed to own seals, which could remain in use for several generations (Collon [1987] 2005: 123–34; Beyer 2001: 430–45). A good example of the latter is the seal of Dummuqu, the principal official of the city of Assur (LÚ ša mu^{bb}bi āli ša URU libbi- āli). His successors in this office continued to use his seal on real-estate documents during the eighth and seventh century BCE (Faist and Klengel-Brandt 2010).

The Iconography of Seals: Between Narrative Medium and Symbolic Representation

Every single motif depicted on a seal bore a specific meaning. In general, seal images were meant to be powerful symbols or icons representative of the seal

owner. They rarely included narrative scenes, but were densely packed statements, encoded in a complex manner and not always easy to decipher today. Since seals also served as amulets, they drew only on positive or apotropaic themes.

Purely decorative seals were rare, except perhaps for some Neolithic stamp seals with geometric patterns and cylinder seals of the early third millennium with brocade-like decoration. Equally rare were narrative depictions of everyday life. When they occur, their purpose is highly specific: seals from the Late Uruk period or from the Seal Impression Strata 8–4 at Ur, for instance, feature economic activities such as weaving and spinning, pottery-making, and manufacture of dairy products (Legrain 1936: pls. 16–18). These seals may be understood as identification badges for the staff working in the relevant economic units.

The depiction of historical events, or even a detailed rendering of hunting, sport, warfare, and building activities, was also rare. In this respect seals differed markedly from large-scale monuments, which do show narrative scenes. Scores of Neo-Assyrian reliefs or wall paintings in various palaces depict the Assyrian army in battle, for example, while not a single contemporaneous seal shows a similar scene.

There are exceptions to this rule, however. Some seals of the late Early Dynastic and early Akkadian periods in northern Mesopotamia depict victorious military campaigns and the ensuing rituals. The seals may reflect real historical events in the fierce competition between the city-states, which resulted either in the complete breakdown or flourishing of the most powerful cities of Ebla, Mari, Nagar, and others. An excellent example is the fascinating seal of King Ishgi-Mari of Mari (Beyer 2007) (see [Figure 17.5](#)). The lower register depicts a war chariot drawn by a kunga equid—the “Mercedes” of the third millennium—on which a human head is prominently displayed, thus probably depicting victory over an enemy king. Following the chariot is a naked prisoner, driven on by a victorious soldier. Two soldier combats are still in progress, while two vultures feast on defeated, naked enemies. The upper register shows the seated king holding his scepter and a frond in his hands, while a servant holds an umbrella above him. Another figure offers a libation to a bull, a crouching lion with a lion scimitar, a star, a crescent, and three dots: these are presumably symbols of the king’s major gods. In the remaining space of the upper register are the king’s name and title (Ish-gi-Ma-ri, LUGAL Ma-ri) and a heraldic rendering of the naked genius *lahmu*, who holds two lions by their hind legs—the only element that seems out of place on this seal, which otherwise celebrates the king’s piety and deeds. But if this emblem is understood as the symbol of law and order, the seal may be deciphered as follows: King Ishgi-Mari, venerator of the great gods Enlil, Ishtar, Sin, and Shamash (?) and protector of law and order, defeated the great enemy of Mari in a fierce battle.

The Main Themes and Motives on Seals: Seventh to First Millennium BCE

The earliest known seals, from the seventh millennium, exhibit mainly geometrical patterns. Animals and anthropomorphic figures become more common from 6000 BCE onward (von Wickedede 1990). A rich repertoire of supernatural creatures, such as the goat-demon composed of a human body and a goat's head, appears on stamps and later on cylinders from the region of modern Iran. Chalcolithic stamp seals often feature motives of wild animals attacking a herd animal. With the development of cylinder seals at the time when urban society and a powerful kingship emerged came an increase in themes illustrated on seals; human conflicts and their consequences were depicted for the first time.

In the third millennium, animal contest scenes were the most frequent theme (see Figure 17.3). These continuous bands of animals, heroes, and (less frequently) anthropomorphic figures, which Anton Moortgat (1940: 10) aptly called *Figurenband*, increasingly were arranged in an artificial vertical position. Banqueting or drinking scenes, featuring one or two seated persons drinking from beakers or with a drinking tube, were also common (Selz 1983). Since these scenes included musicians, servants, and sometimes also sports competitions, they were clearly not ordinary meals but ceremonies of such importance that they embellished the seals of the highest-ranking persons, for example, Queen Puabi, who was buried in the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Pittman 1998). Combat and warfare on a human level were far less frequently represented, and sophisticated war scenes with chariots and siege ramps were found only in northern Mesopotamia.

The Akkadian period witnessed a fundamental change of subjects. While images of deities had been exceptional before the Early Dynastic period, they now became among the most frequent motifs. Some deities were even involved in a fierce “battle of the gods.” This unusual theme was possibly prompted by the dramatic political events and cataclysmic social developments under the new Akkadian rulers, since political or historical events were seldom illustrated unless transposed to a mythical level.

Toward the end of the Akkadian period, the presentation scene developed and remained the most frequent scene of the Ur III period. Here a minor goddess, or rarely a god, introduces a human worshiper to an enthroned deity or king, or the goddess assists in the audience of the worshiper in front of the god. The adoration and worship of and offering to gods (or deified kings) remained the most common subjects during the first half of the second millennium and later

(see [Figure 17.1](#)). Only in the second half of the millennium did themes change fundamentally, possibly due to the influence of Kassites and Assyrians (Matthews 1990). Heraldic illustrations of gods or the “master of animals” were common in the so-called Second Kassite Style and—for the first time—individual, unmatched animated illustrations of animals and hybrid creatures appeared. Sometimes they give the impression of artistic studies: grazing deer; bulls and winged bulls; horses or deer in the so-called flying gallop; an ostrich mother who tries to protect her small chick while being chased; and other designs that testify to an unusual freedom of choice of subjects during the Middle Assyrian period. The seals of the early first millennium, however, did not at all reflect these lively, individual creations. Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian seals again favored ritual scenes, the adoration of gods, or the simple representation of hunting scenes, which were rendered in a stiff and inanimate way. This tendency continued with the Achaemenid seals, where the master of animals (see [Figure 17.4](#)), hunting, and war were among the most frequent themes.

Individual Themes and Motives

Deities, Genies, and Demons

Seals depicted a multitude of supernatural beings. Protective spirits and genies were particularly favored as seal devices (Wiggermann 1992). From the third millennium onward, Mesopotamian deities, genies, and deified persons could easily be identified by the horned crown: a flat, pointed, or cylindrical headgear adorned with horns ([Figure 17.6](#)). In Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, Elam, and beyond, however, thus in most of the regions outside Mesopotamia proper, deities were not necessarily rendered with horned crowns, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between mortals and immortals.



Figure 17.6 Modern impression of Old Syrian cylinder seal depicting the storm god and a winged, armed goddess.

British Museum ME 132824. Hematite; h. 2.25 cm. Provenance unknown; ca. 1700 BCE.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

Some deities can be identified by their attributes and postures. In Mesopotamia, for example, the storm god frequently holds a lightning fork, while in Syria he is often armed and in a smiting pose, holding on a leash his attribute animal—the bull—while standing on two mountains (see [Figure 17.6](#)). Most deities in Mesopotamia wear long garments, whereas Syrian and Anatolian male gods may wear short kilts (see [Figure 17.6](#)). Other male gods that can easily be identified include the sun god, who holds a saw, and heavily armed warrior gods. Various goddesses are depicted, too, most frequently Inana/Ishtar, the goddess of war and love, shown holding weapons, and sometimes identified by a star (stressing her astral aspect as the morning and evening star Venus); she is often accompanied by her attribute animal, the lion (see [Figure 17.6](#)). The suppliant goddess Lama, who mediated between humans and the great gods, was particularly often depicted, probably because of the seals' amuletic value. The identity of deities all too often remains unclear for want of typical attributes and explanatory inscriptions. Even the supreme Mesopotamian gods Anu and Enlil cannot be identified with certainty, let alone hundreds of other deities who are known from textual evidence.

Deities were not always represented in anthropomorphic form, but often instead as symbols (Seidl 1957–71). In [Figure 17.5](#), for example, a person is about to pour a libation offering to several gods, which are represented by a young bull (= Enlil), a crouching lion with a lion-scimitar on its back (= Ishtar), the crescent (= the moon god Sin), and others.

Humans and the King

During the second and first millennia, an astonishingly large number of seals showed either a deity or the king. When we speak of “the king,” we mean the concept of kingship, not a real, individual person. Neither likeness nor portrait was intended; the seals illustrated instead the various aspects or roles of the king, which can be summarized as “the pious ruler” and “the victorious king” (Otto 2013). Humans other than the king mostly appeared in ritual scenes, worshiping or offering to a god or deified king, or being introduced to them. Women were depicted less frequently than men, and children never, except for a few instances where they sit on their mother’s lap. Rarely was any seal owner, other than the king, depicted in connection with his profession.

The third millennium was fundamentally different. Many Early Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III seals depict the seal owner on his own seal. This occurred with high-ranking people of the court, but also with other professionals. For example, some seals, impressions of which were recovered from a palace at ancient Urkesh (Tell Mozan), depicted brewers (brewing women bending over the beer vat), butchers (holding a bull’s leg), or nurses (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 2002). Female and male musicians, farmers, and handicraft people were also depicted. Even midwives in action, helping a woman in labor, were shown in lively scenes (Otto 2016). At the turn from the third to the second millennium in Mesopotamia, the individual disappears—at least in the pictorial representations preserved on major arts and seals, with the exception of cheap everyday objects such as terracotta figurines.

Myths

Representations of myths were rare. Mainly during the Akkadian period, when the number of subjects increased dramatically and a multitude of gods and other supernatural beings appeared, well-known myths were also rendered (Boehmer 1965). These include the legend of Etana, who flew to heaven on the back of an eagle; the myth of the predatory bird Zu, who stole the tablets of destiny; and the fight with the seven-headed monster. Later on, episodes from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* were more frequent, such as the slaying of the Bull of Heaven or of Humbaba, the giant guardian of the Cedar Forest, by Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu.

Animals and Hybrids

Quadrupeds, birds, scorpions, and fish were among the first motifs to appear on seals, as early as the Neolithic period. Animals continued to appear, either

as part of a scene or as isolated elements. The symbolic value of some animals is clear: the scorpion and the hare were symbols of fertility, for example. Others, such as the fly, goat, or monkey, are more difficult to understand. In addition, a large number of hybrid creatures were formed by combining different animals, such as the lion-headed eagle, various forms of griffins, or the winged horse—an early form of the classical Pegasus—already attested on Middle Assyrian seals. Some of these hybrid creatures found their way to Europe, and not only during the classical period; the goat-fish, for example, persisted until medieval times as a zodiac sign (Frankfort 1939: 308–19).

“Filling Motifs” and “Decorative Bands”

Throughout all periods, small, isolated elements frequently appeared between the major protagonists in the seal designs. They could be parts of animals or humans, especially heads; abstract objects, such as dots or chevrons; astral elements; altars and tables; plants and pots; and the enigmatic ball-staff. There must have been a reason (other than simply *horror vacui*) why seal designs so favored these “filling motifs.” Since they seldom appear on large-scale works of art, they are presumed to have had a symbolic or amuletic value and a meaning specific to the seal owner (Collon 1995). Even so-called decorative bands did not merely serve to adorn a cylinder, but had a specific meaning. The best evidence for this is the attractively decorative pattern of the guilloche, which consists of intertwined bands. This design derives from mating snakes, on the one hand, and flowing water, on the other. The guilloche was therefore easy to understand as a symbol both of the crucial fertility of the land, and the vital fecundity and reproductive capacity of humans and animals.

Composition and Style

Several themes and motifs had a lifetime of several millennia, differing chiefly in composition and style: compare the contest scenes in Figures 17.3, 17.4, and 17.5. The figures were not always placed on a single ground line; on some seals, the design was divided into two or more horizontal registers. On other seals, motifs were arranged at various levels within the field, which rendered the illustration enormously complex and dense (see Figure 17.5). The style of a seal decisively depended on the cultural conventions of the respective region and time, the tools used, and the individual abilities of the seal carver. Engraving designs manually with a stylus rendered the images highly differentiated, but this method was laborious. Mechanical tools facilitated work: a drill borer generated circular cavities; a hollow drill, rings; and a cutting wheel, straight lines. These forms could be left as they were,

producing an abstract effect on the decoration, or reworked. In many cases, the eyes, muscles, shoulders, knees, or weapons were drilled and the other parts were later fine-finished by hand. Mechanical tools were also used to mass-produce simple seals in soft material, such as seals in the Mittanian Common Style (Salje 1990).

Correlation between Imagery and Seal Owner

Scholars have made numerous attempts to establish a plausible relationship between the figures depicted on a seal and its owner. Behind this effort is the assumption that the seal owner either had himself depicted or that he chose themes with a direct reference to himself, such as an activity related to his profession or passion, or his personal gods. Such correlations are the exception, however. In the case of certain royal seals, the king himself was clearly depicted (see Figure 17.5). Moreover, some seals were awarded as a personal emblem: the female servants or musicians buried in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, for example, were equipped with cylinder seals that represented musicians (Pittman 1998). If a worshiper was depicted, the seal owner may have identified with this person (see Figure 17.1). Just as with the seals of a king's servants, however, in most cases it was the king who was represented as a worshiper, and not the servant. Since most seals bear no inscription, it is often impossible to clarify the correlation between image and seal owner.

Equally numerous attempts have been made to discover a correspondence between seal inscription and image. For instance, if the seal owner called himself "servant of deity X" in the inscription, it was often assumed that the image represented this god. In fact, the opposite seems to have been the case: the gods mentioned in the seal inscription were only exceptionally depicted in the seal image. At least in the Old Babylonian period, seal owners were clearly eager to assure themselves of the protection offered by as many deities as possible. It seems to have made little difference whether they were rendered in anthropomorphic form, as symbols, or simply named in the accompanying inscription.

Conclusion

Seals are by far the most abundant and illuminating sources for ancient Near Eastern art. As *the* Near Eastern mass media, they served to disseminate images and transport ideologies over vast distances. Since they exhibit a

continuous development from the fourth to the first millennium, they are most important for art historians in understanding the iconography and styles of different regions and periods. Because their date and place of origin can be determined with great precision, they are also extremely valuable for archeologists who find a seal impression or seal in its context. And since many seal owners are known by name and profession, the images on their seals allow deep insight into the self-conception of ancient Near Eastern women and men.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Collon (1987) 2005 is by far the best book on Near Eastern seals, appropriate for beginners and still a precious resource for specialists. The introduction in Porada 1980 provides an excellent overview. Gibson and Biggs 1977 and Klengel-Brandt 1997 offer comprehensive essays on the use, distribution, and iconography of seals. Amiet 1980 includes the largest collection of seal images from the fifth to the third millennium. For third millennium seals, see now also Pittman 2013. Porada 1948 is a useful catalogue and commentary on a major collection of seals.

Black and Green 1992 furnish a useful handbook for beginners learning Mesopotamian iconography.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Religious Architecture

Jean M. Evans

Introduction

The primary unit of religious architecture in ancient Mesopotamia was the temple, defined as the “house of the god” both in Sumerian (**é dingir**) and Akkadian (*bīt ilim*). With this qualification, the earliest ancient Near Eastern temples were those of Mesopotamia, the geographical region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (for the temples of other regions, see this chapter’s “Guide to Further Reading”). The first Mesopotamian temples, however, pre-date the appearance of writing at the end of the Late Chalcolithic or Uruk period (fourth millennium BCE) and belong instead to the preceding Ubaid period (sixth–fifth millennium BCE). This is because certain continuities in temple building from the Ubaid period into the Mesopotamian historical periods suggest that the earlier structures already served as the residence of a deity (Miglus 2011–13: 530–31).

The evolution of early Mesopotamian monumental architecture was a central research theme in ancient Near Eastern scholarship until almost the mid-twentieth century. In general, monumental architecture was considered a hallmark of early civilization. In particular, architectural continuity was a key issue of the “Sumerian problem,” a complex debate over the origins of the Sumerian race (Evans 2012). The possibility of establishing a cultural link through temple building between the Ubaid and Uruk periods suggested, to some scholars, that the Sumerians were the original inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia and thus the forerunners of Western civilization. That so many examples of monumental architecture were considered temples, moreover, reinforced the theocratic view of early Mesopotamian history with its Sumerian “temple-state” ruled over by a “priest-king” (Gibson 2010; Butterlin 2015). Finally, the preference in early archaeological exploration for excavating monumental architecture and retrieving the associated material remains which would ultimately be received as artworks for exhibition in Western cultural institutions also made the Mesopotamian temple a desirable focal point.

Some early excavations, like those of the Iraq Expedition in the Diyala region east of Baghdad, demonstrated an interest in contextualizing temple remains within a larger urban context. It was not until late in the twentieth century, however, that such a research agenda became widespread. Many temples that

were the focus of early excavations still exist in isolation because surrounding remains cannot or have not been excavated. Satellite imagery, in a few instances, has provided important additional information (Stone 2013).

Of course, evidence for cultic practices before the Ubaid period has survived throughout the ancient Near East. According to some scholars, cultic practices housed within architectural structures—that is, religious architecture—emerged in the tenth millennium BCE at Göbekli Tepe, in southeastern Turkey (Schmidt 2006). But temple architecture as it is traditionally understood in ancient Near Eastern studies foregrounds textual criteria (e.g., “the house of the god”). The study of temples is biased toward urban centers, and our knowledge of religious practice favors the urban elite. Certainly, the reality is that temple building was a royal prerogative (Averbeck 2010).

Some scholars prefer, nevertheless, to discuss the locus of cultic or religious practice more generally as one of “sacred space” (Laneri 2015). Sacred space is more inclusive than the temple. It accommodates evidence of religious practice at small sites and in mobile societies, and in the open areas and domestic contexts of the large urban centers. Sacred space can also bridge the divide between religious practice and the temple as an architectural structure housing such practice.

The study of Mesopotamian cult is usually separate from the study of religious architecture because it is difficult to locate the practices described in ancient texts within excavated architectural remains. The archaeological record, in contrast, demonstrates certain patterns of material deposition that must be interrogated by means other than the ancient textual record (Laneri 2015). But when A. Leo Oppenheim (1964) famously gave his reasons for why a Mesopotamian religion should not be written, archaeologists heeded the warning, too. The archaeology of the Mesopotamian temple has largely been one in which temple artifacts have been decontextualized through assumptions that they were out of context when they were not found where it was assumed they should be (e.g., Delougaz and Lloyd 1942). The temple itself was viewed as a dark and inaccessible locus that could not speak for the Mesopotamian cultic experience.

It was therefore no mistake that the most influential twentieth-century study of Mesopotamian religion was entitled *The Treasures of Darkness* (Jacobsen 1976). The gap between the textual record and the archaeological record is, however, closing. The study of Mesopotamian religion in earlier scholarship tended to focus on literary texts (Jacobsen 1976). More recent investigations have examined administrative records to reconstruct aspects of official cult, from which might be elucidated aspects of ritualized movement and offering within the temple (Zettler 1992; Sallaberger 1993; Zettler and Sallaberger 2011).

The form of an architectural structure as well as its installations and

associated artifacts are all used to identify a temple context in the archaeological record. Textual evidence—usually either royal building inscriptions or dedicatory inscriptions—is not always available. When textual evidence is lacking, the identification of a temple can be the subject of debate. The space upon which the temples of urban centers were erected tended, however, to remain sacred throughout history. Temple-building practices often involved leveling operations to prepare for subsequent rebuilding. The chronology of a temple is that of a living structure that was rebuilt, renovated, restored, and enlarged over the millennia (Winter 2000).

Sundried mudbrick was typically the building material of the Mesopotamia temple, as it was for all architectural forms. Although there are some important exceptions, the use of baked mudbrick was limited, particularly in early periods. Baked mudbrick generally served as a facing for an architectural structure and to reinforce certain areas, for example those in which activities involving liquid occurred. Plaster, most often of mud or gypsum, was applied liberally to the walls, floors, and cultic furniture and was, at times, concentrated in the most important areas of a temple.

As with all forms of Mesopotamian architecture, knowledge of any given structure depends on the level of preservation in the archaeological record. The ground plans of Mesopotamian temples are often incomplete and highly reconstructed. The location of doorways and passages is uncertain; sometimes only the foundations are preserved. The study of temple architecture therefore can be an ephemeral affair.

Despite these obstacles, evidence for elaborate rituals has survived. The best known are those related to building activities, which as noted above were a royal prerogative. Various chambers and rooms might be embedded in the foundations or platform of a temple, hidden from view and lacking correspondence with the functional architecture above it (Dunham 1980; Hansen 2001). During the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2004–1595 BCE) at ancient Lagash (Tell al-Hiba), to cite one example, the Bagara of Ningirsu was built on a platform into which various rooms and doorways were constructed; they seem to have been capped with mudbrick and were thus concealed. Evidence for elaborate foundation systems first appears in the Uruk period and continues throughout Mesopotamian history (Dunham 1980). The so-called Harbor Temple at Ur, built by the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (555–539 BCE), appears to have had an elaborate foundation structure that was a model of the temple above it (Woolley 1962: 38–41; Hansen 2001: 221).

Other building practices have been connected to the ritual purification of the ground. Before the first course of brick was laid on the Bagara platform at ancient Lagash, the area was strewn with gold foil, lapis lazuli, carnelian, and other semiprecious materials (Hansen 2001). The practice is also chronicled in royal inscriptions. For example, Shalmaneser I (1273–1244 BCE) claimed

that on the temple foundations he “placed stones, silver, gold, iron, copper, tin, and aromatic plants,” and Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE) deposited into the foundations “everything that catches the eye” (Ellis 1968: 134–35).

The material remains of building rituals are also preserved in the more formalized practice of foundation deposits (Ellis 1968). Figurines buried in Ur III foundation deposits portray the ruler as builder, probably holding aloft a basket with the first brick, which he had prepared in the venerated brick mold. The foundation deposits of Ur-Namma include his building inscription and bits of semiprecious materials surely related to the practices described above. One of the foundation deposits of the ruler Shulgi included in its bitumen-coated box of baked brick a foundation figure wrapped in a textile. Fragments of a wooden duplicate of the figure, perhaps a remnant of the rituals of image-making, were also recovered.

The Mesopotamian temple as an architectural structure is studied principally by empirical and formal analyses. German scholars, who have developed a typology and a vocabulary of temple architecture, have led these investigations (Miglus 1999: 245–54, summarizes the history; see also Heinrich 1982; Miglus 2011–13). Of primary importance for the typology of temple architecture is the approach to the sanctuary or the cella with its altar. The main distinction is between a bent-axis and a straight-axis approach to the altar. In a bent-axis approach, an individual typically enters through the long wall of the cella and must turn ninety degrees in order to encounter the altar placed against the short wall. The straight-axis approach is direct; one could theoretically pass by the temple entrance and see along a straight axis to the cella and its altar.

The bent-axis and straight-axis approaches to the cella and its altar have always received special consideration because they are thought to reveal something about cult. While the use of doors and other screening devices might have altered the experience of these approaches, the shift from bent axis to straight axis represented a fundamental change in architectural form. Its significance reflects the assumption that the mudbrick structures we designate as “altars” served as the locus of the cult. In particular, the altar is understood as the location of the cult statue, which contained the essence of the divine. But cult statues rarely survive. Of those that have, none was found on an altar. More generally, however, altars seem to have been the focal point for the attendant ritual activities of the divine, whose needs were understood in human terms. Late first-millennium texts provide the most detailed information on the cultic personnel who administered what collectively has been termed “the care and feeding of the gods” (Oppenheim 1964: 183–98; Linssen 2004).

Our basic understanding of such aspects of the temple as the building rituals and mudbrick cultic installations described above are somewhat composite in nature since the evidence is culled from different places and periods. It would

be methodologically flawed, however, to project later sources indiscriminately onto earlier periods. To do so is to assume, incorrectly, that religious practices did not change over thousands of years. Different temple traditions in Mesopotamian history belie the concept of monolithic religious practices, despite some general features that have persisted. Continuity in Mesopotamian religious traditions must always be balanced by a consideration of the variations, which stem from a range of factors.

This chapter considers some of the debates surrounding the study of temple architecture, proceeding chronologically. I examine the shifting criteria in modern scholarship for identifying temples from the Late Uruk through the Early Dynastic periods. I then consider the significance scholars assign to the shift from the bent-axis to the straight-axis approach in the late third millennium BCE. Another fundamental distinction in temple architecture, between the broad-room and long-room plans, beginning in the early second millennium BCE, offers a counterpoint. Finally, I return to the great traditions of continuity in Mesopotamian temple building in order to suggest that, when considering aspects of the Mesopotamian temple, a balance must be maintained between the particular and the collective.

The Eanna Precinct at Uruk: Late Uruk Period

Writing first appeared in southern Mesopotamia in the city of Uruk (modern Warka) at the end of the Uruk period. It is now well recognized that Uruk-period culture is rooted in the Ubaid period of the sixth and fifth millennia, in which the first temples in southern Mesopotamia have been identified. Neither period has produced texts permitting a definitive identification of these structures. Not until the Early Dynastic period can excavated remains be securely tied both to rulers and to specific architectural structures mentioned in contemporaneous texts (Hansen 1992). For earlier periods, scholars identify buildings as temples through a set of formal qualities: tripartite plan, niched and buttressed treatment of the exterior, height, the presence of cultic furniture such as mudbrick altars and offering tables, and other criteria (Heinrich 1982; Tunca 1984). But even the most general of these criteria have come under scrutiny (Butterlin 2015).

During the Ubaid period, in levels XVI–VI at the city of Eridu (Tell Abu Shahrein), a series of architectural structures developed from a small shrine to a niched and buttressed building set atop a platform (Safar, Mustafá, and Lloyd 1981). Ultimately, the Ubaid temples at Eridu are tripartite in plan with a large central cella flanked by smaller rooms (Figure 18.1). In level VII, a flight of stairs leads to the main entrance in the center of the long southeast wall, and the altar is placed against the short southwest wall, thus producing the bent-axis approach. The excavators identified an additional mudbrick

feature in the cella as an offering table. In technical terms, the tripartite plan of the Eridu temples is that of a “central room house” (*Mittelsaalhaus*) (Heinrich 1982). Like features such as exterior niching and buttressing, the Ubaid tripartite plan was not reserved exclusively for sacred architecture (Roaf 1984: 88). Throughout Mesopotamian history, houses of the gods bear similarities to both domestic and palatial architecture (Miglus 2011–13; Butterlin 2015).

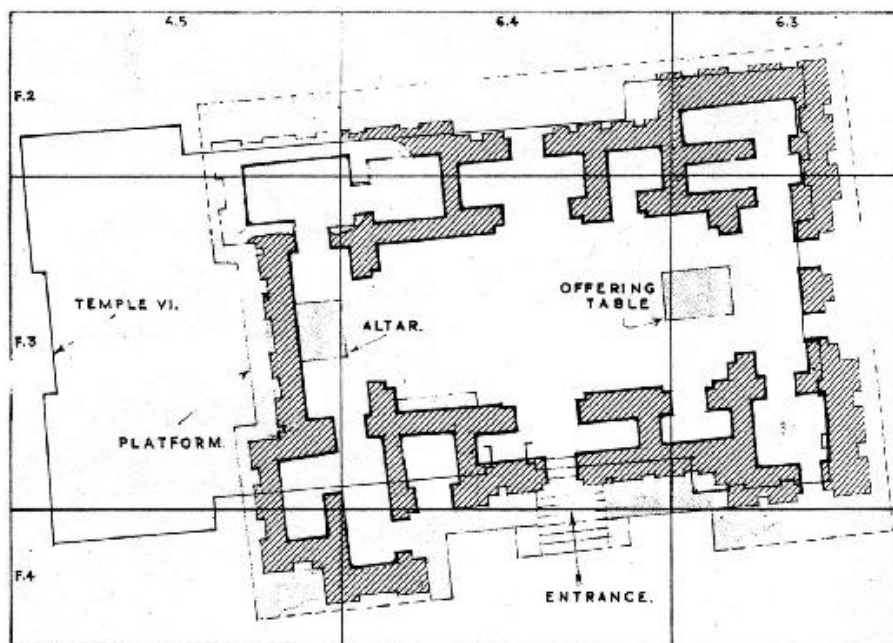


Figure 18.1 Eridu, plan and photo of level VII temple. From F. Safar, M. ‘A. Mustafá, and S. Lloyd, *Eridu* (Baghdad: Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Culture and Information, State Organization of Antiquities and Heritage, 1981), 88, fig. 39, and 106, fig. 54.

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Recent work at sites such as Tell Brak, in the Upper Khabur Valley in Syria, have revealed that by the late fifth millennium such urban characteristics as monumentality, industrialization, and prestige goods had emerged indigenously (Oates et al. 2007). During the Uruk period, however, the city of Uruk was still the major urban center of southern Mesopotamia, with the majority of excavated remains dating to the Late Uruk period (Nissen 2002). In the early twentieth century, German excavators focused on two core precincts designated as Anu (Kullaba) and Eanna because later textual evidence associated these precincts with the gods An and Inana, respectively. Both precincts yielded a sequence of monumental buildings.

In the Anu precinct sequence, the best-known building is the White Temple, a niched and buttressed structure that stood on a platform some thirteen meters high, accessed by stairs. Its plan is that of the tripartite “central room house,” its exterior niched and buttressed. A mudbrick altar was set against the short northwest wall of the large central room; in front of it stood another mudbrick installation identified as an offering table. Because of all these features, the building’s identification as a temple has stood the test of time.

By contrast, scholars have debated the purpose of the large monumental buildings in the Eanna precinct. During the Late Uruk period, level IV of the Eanna precinct underwent at least three subphases (IVa–c) of rebuilding (Eichmann 1989; Heinz 2006). Ultimately, level IV appears to have been carefully dismantled down to wall stumps about one-half meter in height (Nissen 2002). The cleaned areas between the stump walls were packed with bricks to create a platform for the subsequent level III. Where rubbish was used to level the ground, the associated tablets and sealings bear no relation to the structures themselves. Nevertheless, some specialists cite the appearance among this material of the early symbolic form of the goddess Inana, a reed bundle or entry post, as evidence for the cultic character of the Eanna IV precinct (Szarzyńska 1987–88).

Since finds cannot be associated with the architecture, however, the sole evidence available for determining the purpose of the Eanna IV precinct buildings is architectural: that is, the function of the buildings must be inferred from their form. Many of the buildings are tripartite in plan, with exterior niching and buttressing. But since these features were also utilized for secular structures, they are insufficient to identify a temple. Features such as altars and offering tables were not encountered. Since the buildings have multiple entrances, scholars have often proposed that they served functions

involving the congregation of large numbers of people, such as feasting (Algaze 2013: 78). Others have offered interpretations based on specific buildings. Marlies Heinz (2006, 2013), for example, associates the so-called Square Building—which is not tripartite in plan—with the appearance of a new political authority. She understands the Eanna IV precinct as the nexus for religious-secular power struggles.

Most scholars have settled on a religious/administrative function for the Eanna IV precinct because a more precise interpretation is elusive. Although the excavations in the precinct were exemplary for their time, newer excavation methods can yield significantly more data for determining function. At Tell Brak, for example, faunal analysis indicated that food consumption was a primary activity in level 18 of area TW, dated to the Late Chalcolithic 3/Middle Uruk period (Emberling and McDonald 2001: 24; Oates 2005: 18–21; Oates et al. 2007: 594–96). Level 18 consists of a tripartite “Niched Building” with a large open courtyard to the north. The building itself was niched and buttressed on the exterior and had been replastered many times; ultimately, it was filled in with a reddish soil. Had the building been excavated decades earlier, its identification as a temple would have been unquestioned. Initial publications, however, focused on the cooking facilities in the level 18 courtyard, which “would have been ample for preparing large feasts.” The Niched Building itself was described as “a kind of audience hall” (Emberling and McDonald 2001: 24). Later, citing the quantity of mass-produced plates and the variety of fire installations in which large quantities of meat were baked or grilled, Oates (2005: 18–21) referred to the “Niched Building” variously as a “roadside café” or a “cook house.” These alternative interpretations suggest that feasting is becoming as unwieldy as the temple it replaced.¹

Temple Building in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia: Khafajah

Even when features widely accepted as indicative of religious architecture are present, identifying buildings as temples remains problematic. Jean-Daniel Forest (1987, 1996, 2005), in particular, has questioned the identification of many buildings from the Ubaid to Early Dynastic periods as temples. In a study of the Early Dynastic buildings excavated in the 1930s in the Diyala region east of Baghdad, Forest (1996) concluded that many of the structures described by their excavators as temples were not religious in character. Instead, he argued, they were secular buildings in which local authorities held audience while seated on a platform (formerly identified as the altar) in the most important room (formerly designated as the cella). His reinterpretation was not widely accepted in the scholarly literature, however, and eventually it

was definitively refuted by Dorota Lawecka (2011).

Nevertheless, the work of Forest is valuable because it has led to a greater scrutiny of temple architecture. For example, Elizabeth Stone (2013: 162) maintains that there are two types of temples in the Early Dynastic period: the new temple oval type, known through multiple examples and named for its outer oval wall; and a second type that represents a continuation of earlier temple planning. Among the few structures that Forest accepted as a temple was the monumental Temple Oval complex at the site of Khafajah (Figure 18.2). In its size, form, location, construction effort, and cost, the temple oval type is undoubtedly unique (Heinz 2002). At ancient Lagash (Tell al-Hiba), foundation inscriptions from a temple oval refer to the Ibgal of Inana, thus revealing that “Ibgal” was the name for the temple oval type. But the exact meaning of the word is unclear (Ehrenberg 2005: 150).

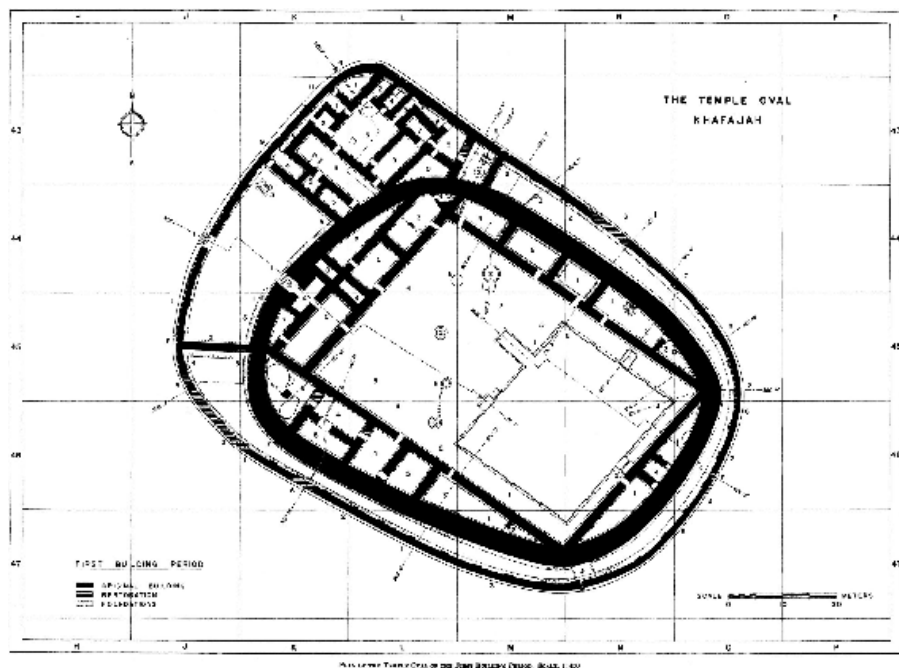


Figure 18.2 Khafajah, plan of Temple Oval I. From P. Delougaz, *The Temple Oval at Khafājah*, Contribution by T. Jacobsen, Oriental Institute Publications 53 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), pl. III.

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

The Temple Oval at Khafajah was constructed on a low terrace, its entrance probably aligned with one of the city gates. An elaborate foundation system involved extensive digging to remove some eight meters of earlier structures. The resulting cavity was filled with clean sand upon which the foundations were erected, then packed with solid clay to a height of over one meter (Delougaz 1940: 11–17). The temple’s inner and outer oval walls run almost

parallel to one another except at the northwest end; here the space widens to accommodate both an open area inside the entrance and House D, where according to the excavators the temple personnel resided. The inner oval wall contains a large courtyard surrounded by rooms. A platform preserved to only a few courses in height and situated at the back of the courtyard was presumed to be the location of the temple proper, housing the cella, but the structure was no longer preserved.

On the basis of Early Dynastic texts, early scholars developed the theory of a “Sumerian temple-state” in which the temple was considered the principal owner of agricultural land, thereby controlling the economy with virtually the entire population in its service. Although scholars no longer consider the temple practice of collecting commodities and redistributing them to its dependents as the sole economic enterprise of Early Dynastic city-states, the temple nevertheless assumed an important role. As the home of the god, the temple was a large centralized household that operated like a secular institution with a variety of properties as well as commercial enterprises (Postgate 1992). The Early Dynastic temple oval type, most completely excavated at Khafajah, best fits such a model. Associated artifacts and faunal remains documented such activities as craft production and food acquisition (Pollock 1999: 126).

Yet located among the domestic structures surrounding the monumental Temple Oval complex at Khafajah were the Sin Temple and the Nintu Temple (Delougaz and Lloyd 1942). Whereas the Temple Oval is monumental and clearly distinguished from its surroundings, the Sin Temple and the Nintu Temple are comparatively modest in size and situated among domestic structures. They may reflect local, neighborhood cultic practices. The sculpture dedicated in these temples suggests that the donors were distinguished by gender (Evans 2012: 188–91). The intersection of gender and cultic practices is a little-explored topic, but female patrons seem to have had a special relationship with the Early Dynastic Inana Temple at Nippur (Hansen 2003).

In an architectural analysis of the early levels of the Sin Temple, D. J. W. Meijer (2002) argued that the temple gradually became more segregated from the community. In the later levels, access was also increasingly articulated with respect to interior space (Evans 2012). In Sin Temple VIII, the entrance to the sanctuary proper was furnished with a door, suggesting that this space could be closed off to restrict access. In addition, in Sin Temple VIII the liquid installations initially associated with the cella shifted to the court, where a trough-like vessel at one corner of the altar served to catch liquids (Delougaz and Lloyd 1942: 55–56).

Essentially, the Sin Temple began as a tripartite “central room house” with a small space at the entrance. Over time, the temple lost its tripartite quality as the space at the entrance expanded into a courtyard and additional rooms

cropped up around it.² As Donald Hansen (2003) observed, in general the Early Dynastic cella recedes farther back into the temple, so that the route to the altar becomes circuitous by comparison with the earlier tripartite plan. In the Early Dynastic Inana Temple at Nippur, for example, the double cellae are placed deep within a building architecturally subdivided into a series of small spaces (Gibson, Hansen, and Zettler 2001: figs. 4–5). The cella itself was a small space filled with mudbrick altars, benches, and tables as well as places for building fires and other installations. In practical terms, the cella could not have accommodated large numbers of visitors (Crawford 2002: 48–49; Hansen 2003: 29). In the Early Dynastic period, the temple's inaccessibility was therefore reflected in the architectural plan.

As the above discussion has suggested, cultic furniture is important for understanding temple architecture (Tunca 1984: 180). In addition, the material remains within temples can further elucidate religious practices that took place there. In the Early Dynastic period, private donors dedicated to temples a range of standardized objects, sometimes inscribed. Stone statues, plaques, maceheads, bowls, and other votive objects comprised distinct typologies that are easily identifiable in form, style, and iconography.³ Dedicatory objects secured the donor's presence in the temple, but they were not always found in the most sequestered parts of the temple. Dedicatory sculpture, for example, is commonly excavated from entrances, courts, and other small rooms, in addition to the cella. Texts attest that temple statues as well as other kinds of objects could be the recipients of offerings. In general, dedicatory objects ultimately were joined in perpetuity with the temple's physical structure through various methods of deposition. While certain practices and categories of objects did continue in later times, the system of temple dedication practiced in the Early Dynastic period is distinctive (Evans 2012).

Ultimately, temple architecture is not always identifiable solely on the basis of plan; a secure identification depends on additional evidence within the structure. In lieu of written documentation, vestiges of religious practice in the form of cultic furniture and material remains must be examined. For example, when in the long sequence of archaeological levels did the area of the Inana Temple at Nippur become a temple proper? Greater quantities of stone vessels and other objects, along with multiple replasterings of certain parts of the structure, argue for identifying the earliest temple in the Early Dynastic levels (Gibson, Hansen, and Zettler 2001). To cite another example, the Kleiner Antentempel at Tell Chuera in northern Syria appears to have grown out of a domestic context in which a central room with an altar would later correspond to the temple cella with its altar (Pfälzner 2001). Archaeological evidence for the dynamic relationship between institutionalized religious practice and domestic devotion becomes particularly rich during the second millennium (e.g., Woolley 1939).

Innovations in Temple Planning at the End of the Third Millennium BCE

By the Ur III period (ca. 2112–2004 BCE), the straight-axis approach in temple planning was favored over that of the bent axis. Other fundamental changes in religious architecture occurred during this period. Although there are antecedents for high platforms, the ziggurat complex in the Nanna precinct at Ur is something of an innovation ([Figure 18.3](#)). During the reign of Ur-Namma, the high stepped platform was enclosed within its own courtyard, which stood on a terrace that raised it above an additional interconnected court. Long narrow storerooms flanked the two courtyards, and a structure described as a “temple kitchen” was located on the ziggurat’s northwest side. This complex was part of the larger Nanna precinct, which included additional architectural structures that served both administrative and cultic functions (Woolley [1974](#)).

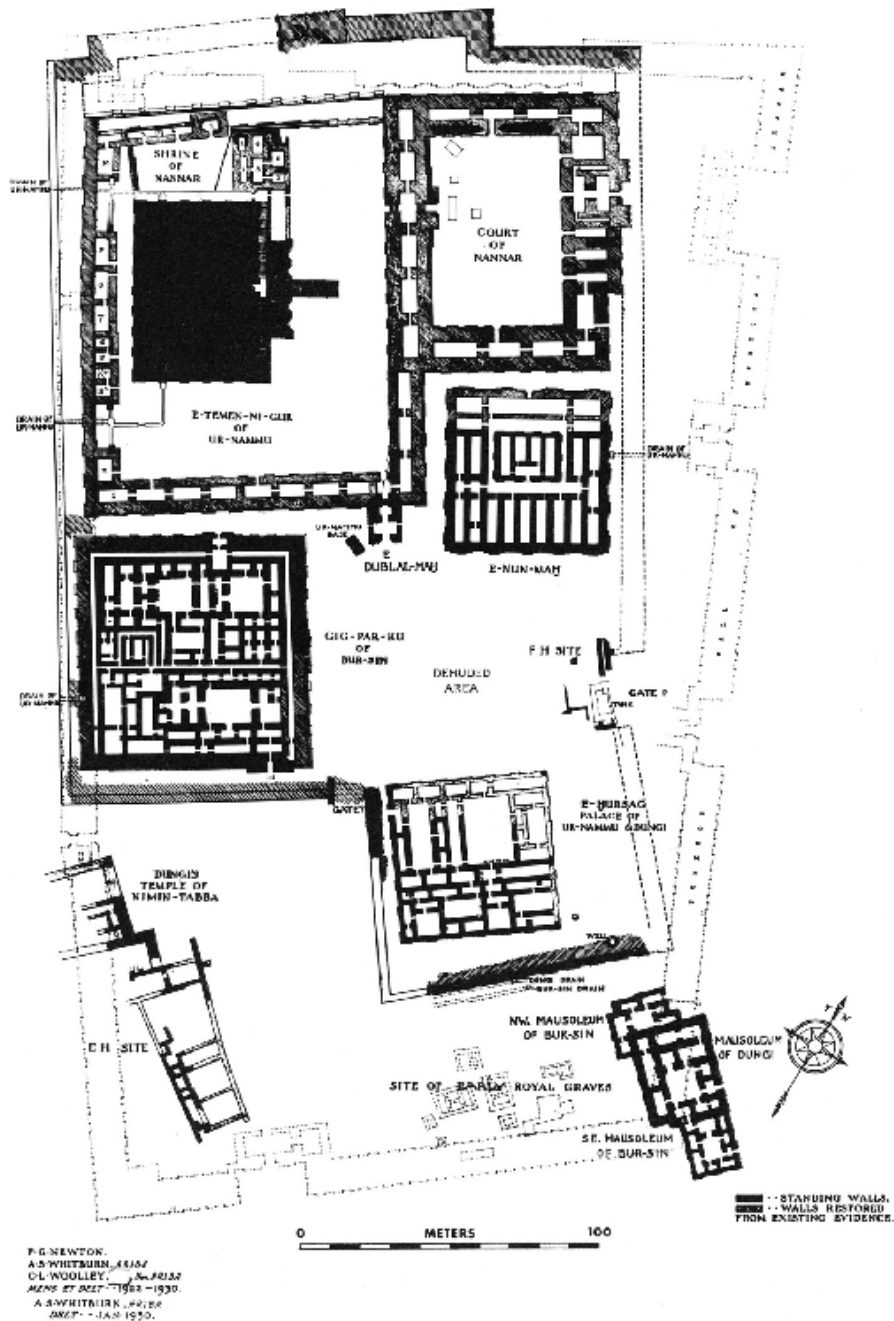


Figure 18.3 Ur, plan of Nanna Temple complex. From C. L. Woolley, *The Buildings of the Third Dynasty*, Ur Excavations 6 (London: Oxford University Press for the Trustees of the two museums [Joint Expedition of the British Museum and of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania to Mesopotamia], 1974), pl. 53.

Courtesy of the Penn Museum.

The straight-axis approach favored in the Ur III period was accompanied by an overall change in temple planning because the cella itself was reoriented. In contrast to the bent-axis approach, with an entrance through the long wall and a ninety-degree turn to the altar placed against the short wall, in the Ur III period the altar (or cult niche) was now placed against the cella's long wall. The resulting orientation of the cella is broad, and the temple plan is thus known as a broad-room (*Breitraum*) plan (Heinrich 1982). The Ningal Temple in the Giparu of the Nanna precinct at Ur provides the earliest example of a broad-room plan (see Figure 18.3). Here the cella is approached on a straight axis through a courtyard leading to a broad-room antecella and finally to a broad-room cella with its cult niche in the long wall. The broad-room temple plan remains distinctively Babylonian throughout ancient Near Eastern history.

How did such a fundamental change in temple planning come about, and what was its significance? Some scholars tie this shift in temple planning to a shift in the role of the ruler. Specifically, for a relatively brief period beginning with the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin, the ruler was deified (Michalowski 2008). Perhaps, some scholars suggest, the ruler's deification was articulated in temple architecture in order to heighten the visibility of rituals that would consolidate royal power and foster new ideologies (Crawford 2002). The limited era of divine rule, however, contradicts the widespread and long-lasting adoption of the straight-axis broad-room plan. Peter Miglus (2001: 325) nevertheless argues that the cult of the ruler did have general long-term effects, once the potential advantages for allowing a greater number of participants in cultic rituals was realized.

Admittedly, we do not know precisely when the change to the straight-axis approach occurred. If developments in temple planning were tied to the deification of the ruler, then the shift should be detectable during the Akkadian period. While this period is not well known archaeologically, the few Akkadian temples that have been excavated appear to follow older plans (Miglus 2011–13: 538). The earliest surviving example of a royal temple is that of the temple of the Ur III ruler Shu-Sin at Eshnunna (Tell Asmar). The temple has a broad-room plan allowing for a straight-axis view ostensibly from the street outside the building entrance. According to a royal inscription, however, when Naram-Sin was deified, the people of Agade built a temple dedicated to him (Frayne 1993: E2.1.4.10). Can we imagine, then, a sort of fundamental repositioning of the temple on the basis of this inscription? After all, it is the people of Agade who build the temple. While the impetus to temple building remains a royal prerogative, the potential here is that agency has somewhat shifted.

While temples could be destroyed and plundered, they were rarely “decommissioned.”⁴ A sacred space tended to remain sacred throughout a city's history. An interesting exception is the temple for Shu-Sin at Eshnunna.

With the collapse of the Ur III Empire, the temple was briefly used for a local ruler. Later, the cella appears to have become an office; ultimately, a kiln for baking tablets was installed in the cult niche (Reichel 2003: 144).

Regional Distinctions in the Early Second Millennium BCE

In the early second millennium, the Assyrian long-room (*Langraum*) temple plan appeared (Heinrich 1982). The plan allowed for a straight-axis approach, but once again the altar or cult niche was placed against the short cella wall. As a result, the cella's orientation is that of a long room. Just as the broad-room temple is distinctively Babylonian, the long-room temple is distinctively Assyrian. Because these are regional distinctions, when the temple plan of one region appears in the other, it merits consideration. Such is the case with the ruler Shamshi-Adad I, the Amorite founder of the first northern Mesopotamian empire.

Shamshi-Adad's origins are uncertain. Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE) of Babylon, also an Amorite, was a younger contemporary of Shamshi-Adad, and both traced their descent from the same ancestors. According to textual sources, Shamshi-Adad bided his time in Babylonia while Eshnunna dominated Assur. Shamshi-Adad then seized control of Assur as well as Mari, ruling from Shubat-Enlil (Tell Leilan) in the Upper Khabur region in Syria. Shamshi-Adad renamed the city “dwelling place of Enlil” after one of the chief southern Mesopotamian gods. His short-lived empire stretched from the middle Euphrates River to the foothills of the Zagros Mountains.

On the acropolis of Shubat-Enlil, a team from Yale University excavated a large temple associated with Shamshi-Adad (Weiss et al. 1990). In its best-preserved phase, the temple had a direct-axis plan with a broad-room antecella and a long-room cella. The Shubat-Enlil temple may be the earliest example of the long-room plan that became typical of later Assyrian temples (cf. Miglus 2011–13: 542). For this reason, some scholars have considered the Assyrian long-room temple plan an innovation of Shamshi-Adad (Weiss et al. 1990: 538).

Despite its new Assyrian long-room plan, the Shubat-Enlil temple utilized a traditionally Babylonian decorative program. On the northern and southern façades are engaged mudbrick columns with spiral and palm tree designs carved into the thick mud plaster surface. Spiral column decoration is attested earlier in Babylonia, for example, at the Ebabbar temple in Larsa (Calvet et al. 1976: pls. I–III).⁵ The palm tree motif enjoyed widespread popularity and a long history associated with columns. In mudbrick, the palm tree column decoration was utilized for the Bastion of Warad-Sin at Ur (Woolley 1939:

pls. 29–30).

Both types of column decoration appear in the temple complex attributed to Shamshi-Adad at Tell al-Rimah, on the Sinjar plain in northern Iraq (Oates 1967: pls. XXXII–XXXIII). The complex consisted of a monumental, terraced structure attached to a high platform or ziggurat (Figure 18.4). The façade of the entire structure—including that of the high platform—and the internal courtyard walls were decorated with semi-engaged columns carved brick by brick either with spiral forms or one of two kinds of palm trunk. While the temple proper at Tell al-Rimah had a Babylonian broad-room plan, the attachment of the ziggurat to the rear of the temple is Assyrian. In southern Mesopotamia, by contrast, ziggurats were freestanding structures enclosed within their own courtyards. Citing the Babylonian broad-room temple plan and decorative technique, David Oates (1982: 91) suggested that Babylonian builders had been brought to Tell al-Rimah.

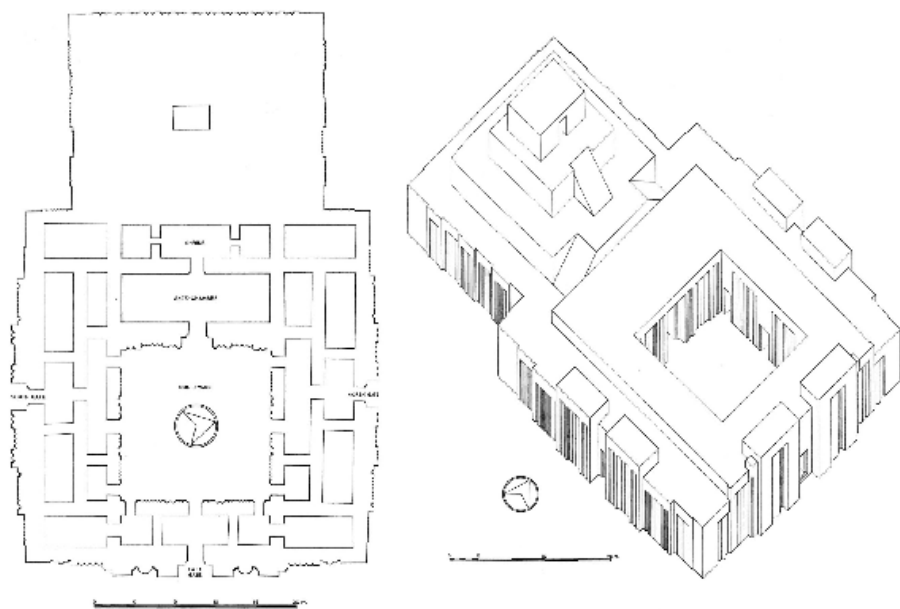


Figure 18.4 Tell al-Rimah, plan and axonometric reconstruction of temple complex. From D. Oates, “The Excavations at Tell al Rimah, 1965,” *Iraq* 28 (1966): 122–39, pls. XXXVI–XXXVII.

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Shamshi-Adad is also credited with the innovation of the double temple, in which two deities are worshiped in separate structures united in a single complex. Citing texts associated with the Assur Temple at Assur but mentioning a temple of Enlil, Peter Miglus (2001) argues that the rebuilding of the Assur Temple under Shamshi-Adad was also a double temple. Although the ground plan is only preserved at the level of the foundations,

one temple exhibits a Babylonian broad-room plan and the other an unusual type of bent-axis plan. Miglus reasons that the Babylonian broad-room plan would have been associated with the southern Mesopotamian god Enlil. He further argues that Shamshi-Adad built a double temple to Enlil and Assur to give the local religion of Assur a greater universality. Soon after the king's reign, the temple was returned to the sole worship of Assur. More generally, some scholars think that Shamshi-Adad introduced Babylonian cultural forms into northern Mesopotamia to legitimize his rule (Weiss et al. 1990; Miglus 2001; Akkermans and Schwartz 2003). Madeleine Fitzgerald (2010: 48) attributes several innovations in temple architecture to Shamshi-Adad, arguing that they characterize an individual who did not rely on the older traditions. Pointing out the long development behind the Assyrian long-room temple plan, however, Miglus (2011–13: 539, 542) cautions against associating such innovations with a single individual.

Conclusion

Despite the innovations in temple architecture described above, the overall trend in Mesopotamian temple building favored continuity. At times, a type of conservatism also persisted. At Ischali, for example, the newly built Kititum Temple complex of Ipiq-Adad II (ca. 1700 BCE) resembled the much earlier Temple Oval at Khafajah (Hill and Jacobsen 1990: 58–66). It might be possible to imagine such conservatism in terms of regional traditions. The Diyala region provides hints of this because it has been, relatively speaking, extensively excavated.

During the second and first millennia, royal inscriptions make explicit the aim of creating continuity. Although at least one king of the Kassite period (1595–1155 BCE) received coronation rites at Babylon in the shrine of the Kassite gods Shuqamuna and Shimaliya, a distinctively Kassite religious tradition is largely unknown. The dynasty strongly assimilated Babylonian culture, and the Kassite rulers rebuilt the temples of the ancient cult centers. The Kassites seem to have “excavated” certain temples at Nippur, which had been abandoned for a period, in order to retrieve the earlier plans (Gibson 1992: 44–45). In their royal inscriptions, the rulers of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty (ca. 626–539 BCE) claimed to have closely followed earlier plans when they rebuilt the cult centers (Winter 2000).

When the Neo-Assyrian rulers restored the ancient cult centers in Babylonia, they performed the building rituals as the Sumerian rulers had millennia earlier. Some Mesopotamian religious practices continued even after Seleucid rule was established around 300 BCE. For example, the Babylonian New Year's festival allowed Seleucid rulers to legitimize themselves through local traditions (Bidmead 2002). Remarkably, during the Parthian period, the Inana

Temple at Nippur retained its distinguishing feature of two cellae, perhaps because of the temple's association with the Sumerian creation myth (Gibson, Hansen, and Zettler 2001). That Nippur was the seat of a Nestorian bishop in the eighth century CE was probably yet another episode in its long history as a holy city (Gibson 1992).

As noted in the introduction, the concept of sacred space has provided a more inclusive way of thinking about the Mesopotamian religious experience. As a result, spheres of cultic practice have expanded beyond the Mesopotamian temple in its most restricted definition (Laneri 2015). The consequences, however, have had little effect on methodological approaches to Mesopotamian temple architecture. The notion of a centralized temple institution that was largely inaccessible to the individual still persists. This may be a reality but it is one that can be moderated by a theoretical orientation that perhaps allows for a fuller understanding of the admittedly limited experience that the individual could have vis-à-vis the Mesopotamian temple.

A corresponding revision in theoretical approaches to architectural form is largely absent from the study of the Mesopotamian temple. One exception is in the Ubaid and Uruk periods, for which it cannot be coincidence that contemporary textual evidence can offer little interpretive support; thus theoretical methodologies are more widely applied to the archaeological remains. For example, Jean-Claude Margueron (2009) interpreted Late Chalcolithic religious architecture at Tepe Gawra phenomenologically, as a sacred stage upon which the human-divine encounter is materialized through offering.

The material remains of the Mesopotamian temple do evoke aspects of human agency that are worthy of being interrogated. Theoretical approaches to the archaeology of religion are finding their way into the Mesopotamian temple, and material culture theory allows Mesopotamian beliefs to assume material forms as remnants of the human-divine encounter (Evans 2012; Laneri 2015). Some observations once tendered for the royal sphere of cultic activity are slowly trickling down to the (elite) human sphere (Winter 1992). In this fuller integration of textual and material evidence, the study of the Mesopotamian temple as an architectural form can be advanced.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Many of the cited references written in English were selected because of their accessibility: Oppenheim 1964 and Postgate 1992 provide general introductions to the Mesopotamian temple, while Ellis 1968 focuses on temple foundation deposits. For the temple architecture of specific

Mesopotamian chronological periods, the study by Heinrich (1982) has not been surpassed; see also Miglus 2011–13 for a concise overview with more recent bibliography.

Beyond the relatively narrow scope of Mesopotamian religious architecture offered here, Boda and Novotny 2010 includes essays on temple building in Mesopotamia, Hittite Anatolia, and Elam. Miglus 2011–13 reviews the archaeological evidence for ancient Near Eastern temples in Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Iran, and the Levant. Wightman 2007 considers the ancient world in general, with chapters on Mesopotamia and Elam, Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, the Arabian peninsula, the Persian Gulf, and beyond. Kaniuth et al. 2013 publishes the proceedings of a colloquium considering the ancient Near Eastern temple from a broad perspective.

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NOTES

1. See also Oates et al. 2007: 596: "it remains unclear whether the building was designed as a form of 'feasting hall.'" Helwing 2003 discusses evidence for feasting at Tell Sabi Abyad, Değirmentepe, and Arslantepe.
2. The plan of the cella is known as a "hearth house" (*Herdhaus*), a term that refers to its bent-axis quality. It derives from the early twentieth-century belief that the bent axis originated to place the hearth farthest from the door, a notion later transferred conceptually to temple architecture. The technical term for the plan of the later Sin Temple is *Herdhaus-Tempel mit vorgelegtem Hof* (Heinrich 1982: 14–15).
3. Additional items dedicated or offered to temples have not survived because of their media: metal was melted down for reuse, for example, and food items and textiles were perishable. Texts document their existence.
4. An exception is the Nintu Temple at Khafajah, over which the houses of the walled quarter were built (Delougaz and Lloyd 1942).
5. Spiral columns also appear on an Akkadian cylinder seal from Nippur (McCown and Haines 1967: N 445).

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Palaces and Elite Houses

Andreas Schachner

Introduction

A “palace” is commonly understood as the residence and household of the sovereign of a given state or community. Investigating palaces of any period or culture in greater detail demonstrates that in most cases such a building serves not only the function of ruling, but also many other purposes: a palace may oversee administrative, judicial, economic, ceremonial, diplomatic, religious, and other activities. Taking these and additional functions into account, a palace must be considered not only the building itself, but a *pars pro toto* for a far-reaching social institution (Winter 1993; Postgate 2003–5). Hence the development of palaces reflects the social evolution of ancient societies.

When archaeological and historical research began in the Near East, the main focus was Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Syria) and Egypt. Research interests have subsequently broadened considerably. The archaeology of the Near East as an academic subject now covers a geographical region extending from Anatolia in the northwest to the Indus Valley in the southeast, from the steppes of Central Asia to the southern Levant and the Arabian peninsula. Since this essay cannot cover such a geographically and culturally diverse region in its entirety, I concentrate on the main architectural developments in the “land between the rivers” (Mesopotamia and Syria) and Anatolia.

The study of palaces in the ancient Near East began in the discipline’s early days. The names of many rulers were known from the Bible, and pioneer scholars sought historical proof of the biblical traditions. Moreover, since monumental buildings—temples, fortifications, and palaces—are the largest structures in ancient cities, their remains were obvious places to begin excavations. And, not least, the early archaeologists’ primary interest was in finding spectacular objects for the large Western museums that chiefly sponsored the expeditions.

The earliest, technically problematic excavations, such as those in the Neo-Assyrian cities, focused on retrieving works of art and cuneiform archives. By the late nineteenth century, newly developed excavation methods made it possible, for the first time, to document mudbrick architecture in detail at sites such as Assur, Babylon, and Uruk (modern Warka). Including trained

architects in these digs led to an approach focused on the typology and technical details of monumental architecture as one of a culture's most striking features. Ernst Heinrich (1982, 1984) was among the most prominent scholars in this field of *Bauforschung*, which was mainly dominated by German scholars. Given this background, finds of any kind played only a minor role in interpretation, since in most cases they, too, were comparatively poorly documented.

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, French scholars in particular attempted a somewhat different mode of analysis by considering a building as whole (Aurenche 1981; Margueron 1982; Forest 1999). Due to a lack of well-excavated and documented examples, this approach could only be applied to a limited number of buildings, such as the palace at Mari (Margueron 2014). Given the difficulties in documenting the architectural features themselves and associated finds, an analysis that integrates both elements in a comprehensive investigation is still problematic and only occasionally achieved.

Thus while any analysis of these monuments has to focus on the architecture itself, it should understand it “as the materialization of a mental construct” (Mekking 2009: 23)—more than simply the mantle for social actions taking place within it. Although in most areas we scarcely know how these enormous buildings were used due to a lack of well-documented finds, we may still draw some cautious conclusions from broad relationships between the built environment and human behavior. From the beginning, the initiator or sponsor of such a building and its planners had a clear notion about how it should function. One would expect that form is designed according to function (Rapoport 1969, 1993). On the other hand, the built (and thus the fixed) form of a building profoundly influences the way it is used. There is thus a reciprocal relationship between form and function (Sanders 1993).

Dealing with monumental architecture in relation to ancient cultures' “time” is another parameter one has to keep in mind, since a monumental building codifies the way it is used—that is, the social behavior within the building—not only for the builder's lifetime, but for a much longer period. Thus the commissioning body secures, or one might even say ritualizes, a certain behavior within the building for a lengthy period (generally, the building's lifespan) and in so doing it achieves power not only over the contemporary generation but also for future generations. In this way, monumental architecture is much more than simply a large building: it resembles and defines the social structure and backbone of a given society for the present and in the future. Thus, although over time and especially after the mid-second millennium BCE more and more functions were added to palaces and older structures were replaced by new ones, the practice of building new palaces in new cities—especially by Neo-Assyrian kings, at Nimrud, Nineveh, and Dur-Sharrukin—granted the kings power over the long term and even beyond their deaths. At least one reason why ambitious new kings sought to

construct new palaces, or even entire new cities, was to put an end to existing conditions and establish their own for the future.

Taking into account the various social, ideological, economic, religious, and many other functions of monumental architecture, the evolution of palaces—like that of temples—was closely related to social developments. Since vertical and horizontal hierarchies of a society are only partly visible in the archaeological record, we probably detect only a rather late stage of the development, when such hierarchies were turned into a built environment. Structures used as a ruler's dwelling must have existed much earlier, but social organization was insufficiently developed to result in the creation of enduring official architecture that is recognizable through archaeological means. Social hierarchies are archaeologically visible only if they differ in form from most other structures, are architecturally substantial, and are rebuilt in a similar way within a region or over time. Differences in form between monumental buildings and ordinary houses allow us to recognize different functions by assuming that single individuals were unable or unwilling to plan, build, and maintain architecture not used for subsistence. With this background, we may assume that either religious or political hierarchies were the driving factors behind the archaeological record. Erecting a defined architectural form over a long period, or in a wider geographical setting, clearly implies the existence of a ruling group ordering the society to build in a way dictated either by religion or political ideas.

In general, social hierarchies visible through architecture are not limited to a certain economic or social way of life (for example, hunter-gatherer versus agricultural or pastoral). Undoubtedly, the monumental buildings of Pre-Pottery Neolithic date at sites such as Göbekli Tepe indicate social division and stratification. The existence of two different types of “special buildings” of the same period at Nevalı Çori and Çayönü Tepesi clearly reflects a differentiation of functions and hierarchies (Schachner [1999](#)).

The Development of Palaces in Greater Mesopotamia and Syria (ca. 3000–2000 BCE)

Strikingly, the highly developed architecture of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic era was not developed further following the transition from a food-collecting to a food-producing economy. Beginning in the Hassuna/Samarra period (ca. 6500/6000–5000 BCE) and continuing in the Halaf period (ca. 5200–4500 BCE), it took several millennia to develop anew the social prerequisites for complex architecture that is archaeologically visible. This does not mean that these prehistoric cultures of Mesopotamia lacked social hierarchies, but they did not reach such a complexity whereby social difference would become

visible in the excavated remains of the built environment. During the Ubaid period (ca. 5500–3500 BCE), clearly regulated building forms appear for the first time (Kubba 1998). Their distribution over most of Mesopotamia and even beyond indicates that these tripartite houses follow a particular cultural need and social habit. Separating different economic and social functions of the house on either side of a central hall, which served as the entrance and to distribute internal traffic, follows the natural and most efficient principles of organizing space within buildings. For this reason, comparable tripartite houses are found independently in many unrelated cultures and geographical regions. In early architectural developments, the Ubaid-period tripartite houses represent a distinct step toward housing separate functions within a building. Symmetry is the organizing principle employed to achieve this goal. As the following discussion demonstrates, symmetrical organization is a key feature of any kind of official architecture.

Although in most cases these tripartite buildings exhibit no evidence for special functions, the long tradition of rebuilding the same type of structure on the same spot in Eridu (levels XVII–VI) in itself indicates a special purpose for this building, which by analogy with other sites can be identified as a temple (Heinrich 1982). Continuous rebuilding of the same building type clearly points to social requirements to do so, independent of changing actors. A comparable development can be observed at Tepe Gawra (levels XX–XII) in northern Mesopotamia, although differences among the official buildings there indicate different functions (Rothman 2002). Whether some of them can be designated “palaces” is impossible to say. The general parallels between tripartite buildings of secular use and those utilized as early temples indicate that the latter were derived from the normal house plan. To distinguish a religious function, alternating niches and pilasters were applied to the façade beginning with the earliest levels of Eridu (Sievertsen 1998). This feature was retained throughout Mesopotamian history, transcending most ethnic or religious changes and reflecting strong and enduring religious hierarchies. Notably, monumental and standardized buildings serving religious purposes were developed first.

The next step in the development of horizontal and vertical segregation and hierarchy is archaeologically visible in the remains of level IVa of the Eanna precinct in Uruk (ca. 3200–2900 BCE). Although the associated texts establish the precinct’s religious function, here alongside the so-called temples C and D, which both show the characteristics of a tripartite *Mittelsaalhaus* as defined by Heinrich (1982: 7–14), at least one building, Palace E, suggests a different but official and representative function within this context. Since at contemporaneous sites in northern Syria (e.g., Habuba Kabira, Tell Brak, Tell Hamoukar) and southeastern Turkey (Hasek Höyük, Arslantepe) comparable buildings served functions that may at least in some cases be described as domestic, one must be cautious in labeling these

buildings as “public” in the most general way.

Yet the enormous amount of labor and organization these buildings represent, and the contemporaneous Anu ziggurat immediately west of the Eanna precinct, demonstrate the ability of Uruk’s ruling class—whether legitimized religiously or politically—to force a large part of the society to execute these constructions. Although we cannot reconstruct how these buildings were used or identify their connections to any social groups, we should not doubt a distinction of different functions and users at the highest level of Late Uruk society. But the final question—whether these buildings can be attributed to some kind of secular ruler—cannot be answered at the moment. It would be tempting to attribute these changes to the emerging distinction between **en** or **ensi** (high priest) and **lugal** (king), which occurs only a few centuries later, at the beginning of the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900 BCE) (Sallaberger 2003–5). The linguistic separation between a religious and a secular ruling office in the evolving city-states—**ensi** versus **lugal**—is mirrored in new terms for the buildings and institutions over which these persons presided. In Sumerian a house is called E, a temple is referred to as E + god’s name (the house of the god xy), while the building and institution of the palace is labeled E.GAL, a phrase transferred into Akkadian as *ekallu(m)* (Postgate 2003–5: 195).

In the early centuries of the third millennium, the inhabitants of southern and central Mesopotamia took another step in cultural development by transforming some of their cities into the centers of centralized city-states, which controlled the surrounding area or hinterland. This change accompanied an increasing social segregation and the establishment of complex hierarchies, and is reflected in the appearance of monumental buildings in many of these early Mesopotamian states (Edzard 2004: 38–96).

Religious buildings in Greater Mesopotamia exhibit a high degree of typological standardization over time and over a considerable geographical expanse (Heinrich 1982). By contrast, palaces are far more diverse and heterogeneous, because their designs followed much more individual criteria (unless otherwise indicated, for plans of the buildings and sites consult Heinrich 1984; Miglus 2003–5). Commissioning authorities had to follow general cultural conventions, but these were less rigid than in the case of temples. The individual interests and wishes of the king (or his entourage) who commissioned such a building were far more influential than with religious buildings. As a result, while temples can easily be defined and isolated, no comparably general types of palaces can be defined.

During the third millennium, structures interpreted as palaces by excavators or scholars have been identified in many Mesopotamian cities (Heinrich 1984: 14–48). Since few have been completely excavated, it is impossible confidently to determine their function as palaces or to define common features as characteristic of a palace of the early and mid-third millennium (Heinrich 1984). The plans of buildings attributable to official state functions

at Jemdet Nasr, Uruk (*Stampflehmgebäude*), Kish/Hursagkalama (Palace A, palace in area P), and Eridu reveal some common characteristics: they differ from temples in their internal structure and the grouping of rooms. Apart from their size, the chief characteristics are the overall symmetrical structure and grouping of rooms around interior courtyards (Figure 19.1). The long rectangular layout of many interior courts resembles the old arrangement of the tripartite *Mittelsaalhaus*. The courts function both to distribute internal movement and as open spaces for activities. Rare hints at function reveal that these buildings served multiple purposes and social activities, such as storage, craft and manufacture, and reception, separated by the grouping of certain rooms. Unlike the plans of temples, which usually have a predetermined route through the structure, early examples of monumental official buildings display no such established patterns of circulation.

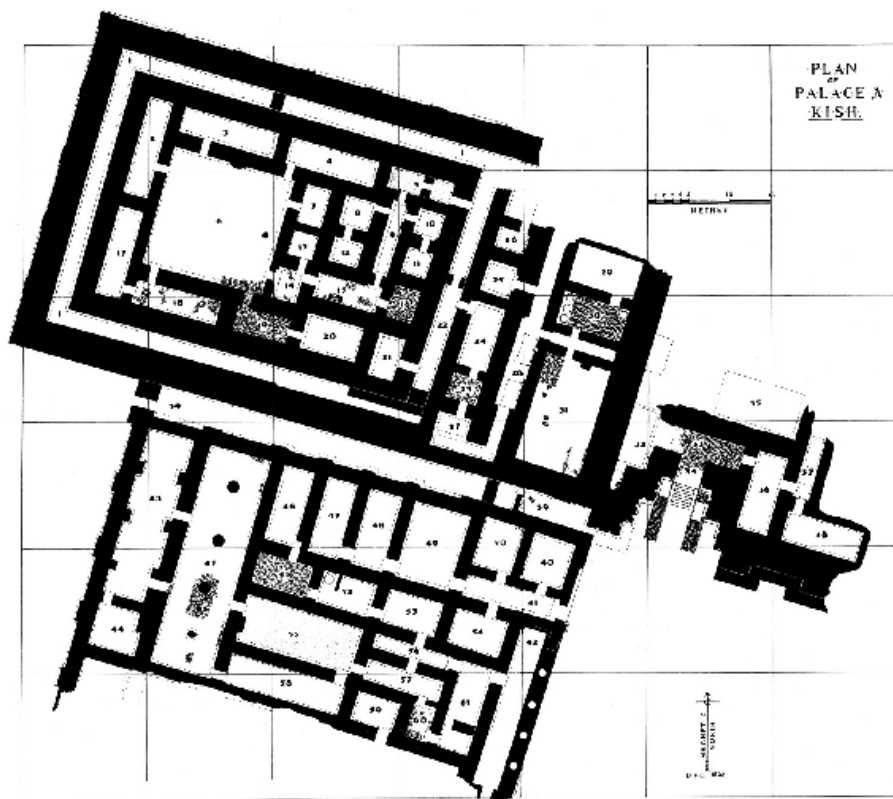


Figure 19.1 Kish, plan of “Palace A.” From E. Mackay, *A Sumerian Palace and the “A” Cemetery at Kish*, Field Museum of Natural History Anthropology Memoirs 2 (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1929), pls. 21–22.

The heterogeneous appearance of early monumental architecture should not be surprising, since it reflects the diverse political character of central and southern Mesopotamia (Edzard 2004: 38–76). This situation changed during

the Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2200 BCE), when the Akkadian dynasty ruled large areas of the region (McMahon 2012). Although the city of Agade has not yet been located, examples of Akkadian palaces at Tutub (modern Khafajah) and Tell Brak indicate for the first time a certain uniformity of plan, which may result from centralized rule (Figure 19.2). In both places, long rectangular rooms are arranged around central, more or less quadrangular courtyards (Heinrich 1984: 14–47). Remarkably, these architectural similarities occur in palaces located in provincial centers far apart from one another. This fact may hint at a degree of overall integration of the country into a political and social system predefined by a centralized state.

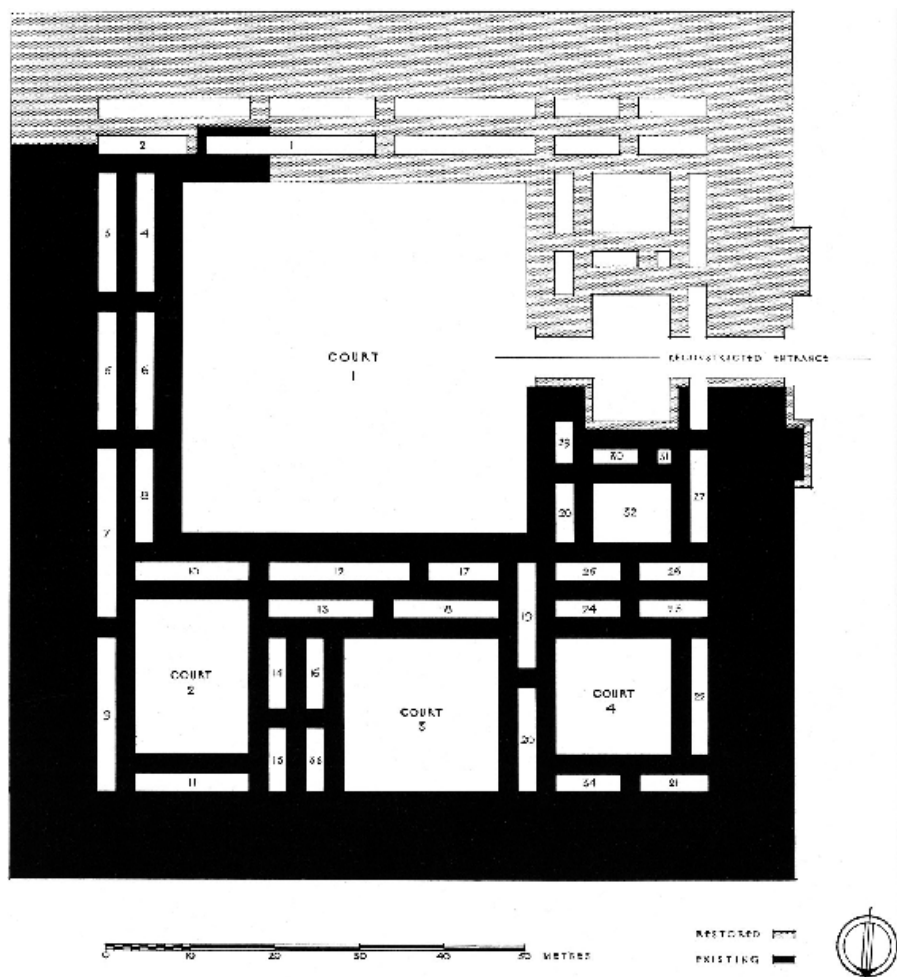


Figure 19.2 Tell Brak, plan of “Akkadian Palace.” From M. E. L. Mallowan, “Excavations at Brak and Chagar Bazar,” *Iraq* 9 (1947), pl. LX.

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Textual evidence establishes that, from the mid-third millennium onward,

Mesopotamian states were ruled by a king from his city palace (Postgate 2003–5; Sallaberger 2003–5). Since the texts refer to provincial palaces not as the *ekallu(m)* of a provincial ruler but again as the palace of the king, the palace was not only the house of the ruler but a symbol of his rule, even in provincial towns where he did not reside. The building had clearly become a synonym for the institution of kingship and the king himself. The location of most of these edifices also establishes the central meaning of the *ekallu(m)* as the mark of social development. Their placement in the city's center, sometimes at a slight elevation, symbolically demonstrates that they are at the center of society and that the civilization created and guaranteed by the king is gathered around it.

Although the plans of monumental public buildings differed more from each other than did those of temples, some features seem to have been shared in Mesopotamia over long periods. The traditional *Mittelsaalhaus* was repeatedly also used for buildings during the Ur III (ca. 2112–2004 BCE) and Old Babylonian periods (ca. 2000–1600 BCE), such as those in Assur (the original plan of the Old Palace), the palace of the kings of the Ur III dynasty at Ur, or the palace at Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) (Heinrich 1984: 49–82; Miglus 2003–5). The last-mentioned building well exemplifies how long such buildings were used, since it continued in use, with minor changes in overall layout, from the late third well into the second millennium BCE.

A second characteristic feature of palaces of the third and second millennia is the so-called *Hürdenhaus* (Heinrich 1982: 18–21, figs. 54, 57–58). This feature links official buildings with the houses of the urban elite, and in many examples it is combined with other standard features, such as the *Mittelsaalhaus*, large quadrangular courts, and a generally regulated and symmetrical building plan. Examples include the “Palace,” the “Southern Building,” and the “Azuzum Building” at Eshnunna; the “Large secular Building” at Neribum; and palaces at Adab or Larsa (Heinrich 1984: figs. 21–37). Moreover, we may assume that the social and functional background of their internal organization had roots at least partly extending into the prehistory of these structural features. The use of the *Hürdenhaus* plan as a core element illustrates relations between different levels of society, but also demonstrates that the royal household was a normal household. Despite many individual features, from the third millennium onward buildings in Mesopotamia were constructed by connecting predefined architectural modules such as the *Hürdenhaus* or *Mittelsaalhaus*. That these grouped rooms were used for over two millennia indicates how deeply rooted were the architectural traditions, independent of changes in religion, political power, or ethnicity.

Although in terms of plan these buildings are linked to normal dwellings, their regular and symmetrical layout—often either square or rectangular—distinguishes them from the ordinary urban habitat. The use of symmetry to

express control suggests that this architecture corresponds to certain ideological goals. In the light of later textual and architectural evidence, we could interpret these efforts as the wish to create a controlled environment, in contrast to the “wild” realm outside the civilized world of cities, temples, and especially palaces. This attitude directly parallels the power of the king, who ruled as an agent of the gods. Thus the building literally stood for the ruler’s ability to create a secure and civilized world. In this interpretation, the thoroughly regulated manner in which such buildings were erected represents the ruler’s creation and guaranteed maintenance of civilization.

During the third millennium, developing urban centers in Syria not only reflect the growth of regional states with strong economies, but also seem in part to foster different architectural traditions. At sites along the Khabur and Euphrates rivers, connections with Babylonian buildings are strong, as shown by modified versions of the *Hürdenhaus* scheme at palaces in Tell Chuera (Palace F), Tell Beydar, or Mari (Palace P-1); and, toward the end of the millennium (the *shakkanakku* period), in Mari (eastern palace) (Miglus 2003–5: fig. 2c) and Tell Bi’a (ancient Tuttul) (Miglus 2003–5: fig. 2d). Structures unearthed in western Syria, such as Palace G at Ebla (Pettinato 1991: 51–64), may have differed slightly, especially given the seemingly large central courtyards flanked with narrow columned halls around which the buildings were apparently organized.

Mesopotamia and Syria in the Second Millennium BCE: Kingdom to Empire

The “regeneration of complex societies” (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 288–326) again led to Mari’s dominance among the Syrian cities along the Euphrates and in the Jazirah (ca. 2000–1750 BCE). Because of its thorough excavation and very good state of preservation, the large palace of Zimri-Lim is probably the palace par excellence of the ancient Near East (Margueron 2004, 2014). It vividly expresses the cultural and political climax Mari reached in this period, and offers a rare opportunity to study in detail the architecture and various functions of such a building (Figure 19.3). The building’s history dates to the mid-third millennium, and the eighteenth-century plan may have developed through a gradual filling of empty spaces between earlier freestanding buildings. To judge by what we know from the excavations, the building was not planned and executed as a single massive operation, but developed over a longer period that probably lasted several centuries.

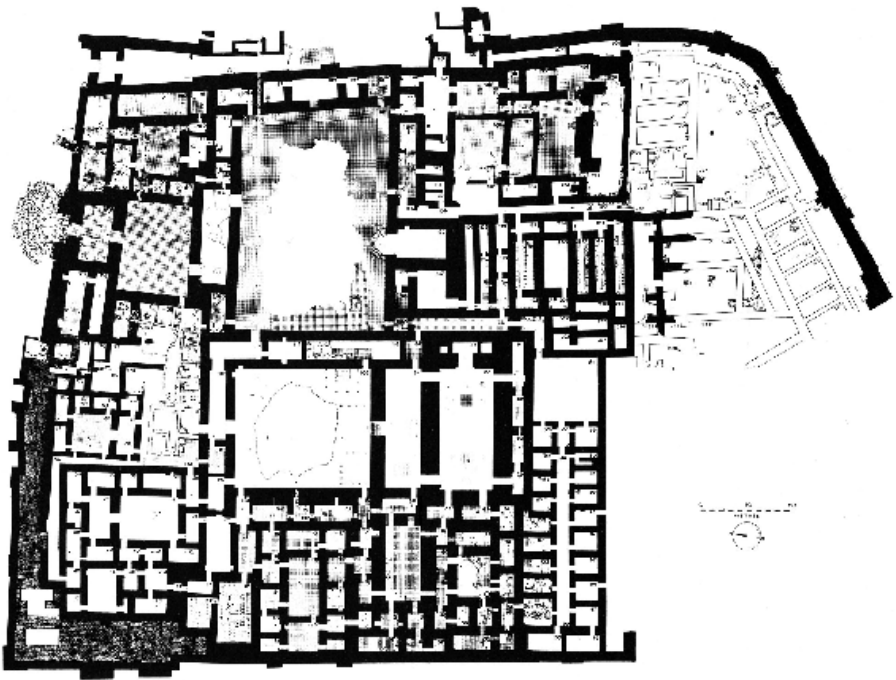


Figure 19.3 Mari, plan of palace of Zimri-Lim. From A. Parrot, *Mari: Le palais*, vol. 2: *Architecture*, Mission Archéologique de Mari (Paris: Geuthner, 1958).

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Looking at the building as a whole, the palace was clearly composed of the *Hürdenhaus* and *Mittelsaalhaus* schemes used as basically independent modules. Each entity is grouped around an indoor court and seems to have had independent functions: administration and archive, a temple, storage area, an industrial production sector, the royal residential area, a kitchen, a bathhouse, guestrooms, and of course, in the center of the palace, the official throne room decorated with wall paintings. In general the building is divided into two sections more or less along a north-south axis. Perhaps this arrangement hints at the later separation of Neo-Assyrian palaces into the entrance part (Akkadian *babānu*) and the house part (*bītānu*), although obvious differences between the general organization of rooms and functions remain. But if this division underlies the plan of the Mari palace, it marks a transition between the older traditions—still visible in the structure of the individual parts—and new trends.

In western Syria, the so-called Western Palace (Q) at Ebla (Pettinato 1991: 25–27) and the level VII palace at Alalakh (Tell Atchana) (Miglus 2003–5: fig. 6c) exhibit regional differences in the organization of rooms and in other features. In contrast to these relatively small regional powers, the palace

complex unearthed at Qatna (Tell Mishrife) not only reflects the might of this middle Syrian kingdom, but also combines, within a single building, different traditions of architecture and decoration (al-Maqdissi, Morandi Bonacossi, and Pfälzner 2009: 154–269). It suggests a position within a far-reaching interregional network. Moreover, Qatna is also a rare instance where the royal necropolis has been found, in addition to the palace (al-Maqdissi, Morandi Bonacossi, and Pfälzner 2009: 198–243).

Following the collapse of the Old Babylonian kingdom, the political landscape of the ancient Near East was reconfigured. In the second half of the second millennium, large empires took control, replacing the earlier smaller states: the Mittani (ca. 1500/1480–1350 BCE), followed by the Middle Assyrian in the north; the Kassite (ca. 1595–1155 BCE) and Elamite kingdoms in southern Mesopotamia; and the Hittites in Anatolia and later, also in northern Syria (Potts 2012). Given this development, one would expect a distinction between *the* royal palace in an empire's capital city, and local palaces serving as the seats of provincial rulers. But in most cases no such distinction can be confirmed, since one of the two types is missing in the archaeological record. For example, we know local palaces of the Mittani period only at Tell Brak, Tell al-Hamidiya (Wäfler 2004), and Nuzi. Whereas the comparatively small structure at Tell Brak consists of a central court around which rooms are grouped probably to form a square building (Oates, Oates, and MacDonald 1997: 1–13, fig. 12), the palace at Nuzi almost reaches the width of the earlier Mari building (Heinrich 1984: 82–89). It is divided into three sections, each grouped around a large indoor court. The building as whole seems to develop further the transition already observed at Mari (Heinrich 1984: 82).

At Dur-Kurigalzu (Aqar Quf), a large palace of the Kassite period (ca. 1595–1155 BCE) has been partly excavated (Heinrich 1984: 89–91). A large court around which three *Mittelsaalhaus* structures are located forms the building's core. Other parts of the building are represented by de facto independent house units, which from a structural perspective point to Neo-Assyrian palaces. Thus, this building, too, seems to represent a link between older traditions and ways of planning still to come (Heinrich 1984: 89). The Middle Assyrian palace at Assur does not exhibit the separation between *babānu* and *bītānu*, which we saw already at Mari and which later became a characteristic feature of the Neo-Assyrian period. Here, by contrast, the tradition of the place seems to have forced Assyrian planners and builders to follow the older plan, at least in part.

In northwestern Syria, the palace of the Mittanian vassals at Alalakh level IV, with its two-column entrance, anticipates the later *bīt-bīlāni* structures of the Iron Age and perhaps indicates their local roots (Miglus 2003–5: fig. 6c). By comparison, the slightly larger palace at Ugarit (Ras Shamra) is far more complex and clearly reflects the wealth of this trading city (Yon 1997: fig.

20). This palace provides a rare instance where an extended garden area within a palace can be identified.

No second-millennium palace in western Syria has parallels with Hittite royal architecture, although the Hittites ruled the region for a period of several centuries—once again reflecting the strength and continuity of local traditions. Whereas in Mesopotamia typological features persist over several millennia, the buildings in Syria, especially west of the Euphrates, are much more diverse and heterogeneous. This situation at least partly mirrors the region's fragmented ethnic and political composition. We do not find in Syria an approach comparable to the Mesopotamian tradition of building with predefined modules. Each building has more or less its own structure and therefore also its own way of being used, probably again echoing the region's heterogeneity.

Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Palaces: First Millennium BCE

While in architectural terms the second half of the second millennium may be seen as period of transition, the collapse of the large empires that marked the end of the Late Bronze Age led to the reestablishment of a mixed system of city-states in western Syria and large empires in Mesopotamia. Their establishment and the unprecedented accumulation of political power during the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 935–612/610 BCE) impelled the Assyrian kings to build a series of new palaces in the early first millennium, beginning with the palaces of Assurnasirpal II at Assur and Nimrud (Northwest Palace) (Heinrich 1984: 98–197; Miglus 2003–5: 250–54; Kertai 2015). Whereas previously a city typically housed only one palace, now we find several monumental buildings in each city. In some cases, we might imagine that older palaces fell out of use or fashion, but the plans of sites such as Nineveh or Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad) suggest a contemporaneous use of these buildings.

In contrast to the third and second millennia BCE, when palaces were mostly situated at a city's center as its core, sometimes elevated on artificial platforms, in the Neo-Assyrian period new features of urban planning became visible. Perhaps following the example of Assur, where the early palaces were erected on the city's northern edge overlooking the Tigris River, Assyrian palaces were in most cases located at an edge or side of the city, placed atop the city wall, and furnished with a view of the countryside (Heinrich 1984: 99, 185–86). Apart from security reasons favoring a clear separation from the city, the planners evidently sought to create a connection between the landscape and the royal precinct. This aim was also achieved by setting aside

areas of the palace compound for gardens and parks, as on the citadel of Dur-Sharrukin. This integration of the different spheres is also visible in images carved on the palace reliefs, as for example Assurbanipal's garden scene at Nineveh (see [Figure 8.3](#) in Green, this volume).

In terms of building plan, the separation of the building into a (at least partly) public part, the entrance part (*babānu*), and a second more private and closed area, the inner part (*bītānu*), already noted in earlier examples, is fully developed in Assyria in the first millennium BCE ([Figure 19.4](#)). Both parts are organized around large courts. If a palace was used as a royal residence, the long rectangular throne room containing a slightly elevated platform for the throne belonged to this group of rooms situated between the two major parts of the building (Turner 1970: pl. 38). A comparable plan, but on a generally smaller scale, characterizes many elite houses of the later Neo-Assyrian period at Assur and other Assyrian cities: the “Governor’s Palace” at Nimrud (Heinrich 1984: 124–26); the “Rotes Haus” and the “Große Haus” at Assur (Heinrich 1984: 167–70); the residences at Dur-Sharrukin (Heinrich 1984: 155–67); the “Rotes Haus” in the provincial city of Dur-Katlimmu (Kreppner and Schmid 2013); and the palace at Hadatu (Arslan Taş) (Heinrich 1984: 133; Miglus 2003–5: fig. 4b). Clearly, over the course of the empire elites adopted royal conventions (Heinrich 1984: 99), whereas in the empire’s early centuries elite houses followed more traditional notions.

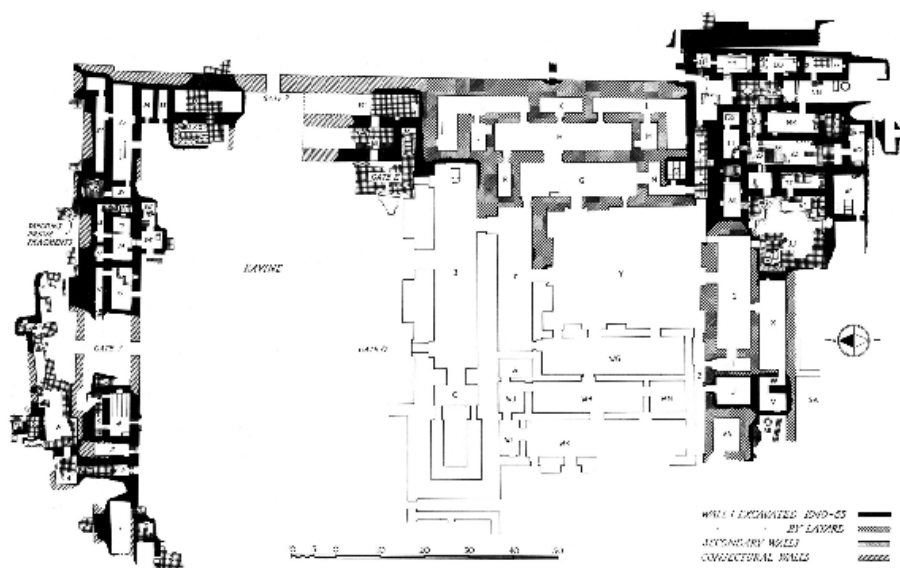


Figure 19.4 Nimrud, plan of Northwest Palace (ninth century BCE). From M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains* (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1966), folding pl. III.

Reproduced with permission of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq.

The plans of Neo-Assyrian palaces exhibit a much greater degree of

homogeneity than those of earlier examples, perhaps because the empire reached a much higher level of integration into a system dominated by the king. Within this framework, the palaces' plan represented not only the will of the individual king or administration that commissioned the building, but mirrored kingship as a *pars pro toto*. Perhaps this helps explain the homogeneity of palaces throughout the empire and over a period of nearly 350 years.

As with earlier palaces, Neo-Assyrian palace architecture is characterized by the continuous use of the traditional units: a *Hofhaus*; a tripartite *Mittelsaalhaus*; and, especially with regard to the entrance part (*babānu*), the *Hürdenhaus* (Heinrich 1982). By combining these predefined units, long-term architectural and cultural traditions are evident and functional divisions among the architecturally defined units within the palace become visible. Functional divisions are in most cases difficult to define in detail, either because the palaces have been inadequately excavated and documented or have only partially survived. In general, official functions—including industrial installations—are located near the entrance, within the *babānu*, while the *bītānu* served as the residential quarters. In between lay the official area with the throne room, accessible from both sides.

With the Assyrian palaces, for the first time, significant remains of architectural decoration have been recovered along with the buildings themselves (Kertai 2015: 235–36, with bibliography). Especially in rooms used for reception and feasting, and in the throne room, the lower part of interior walls (usually to a height of two meters) were decorated with orthostats carved with narrative relief sculptures, murals, panels made of glazed bricks, and knob-plates. The entrance doors of at least some palaces and temples, such as at Imgur-Enlil (Balawat), were embellished with copper strips decorated with narrative scenes (Schachner 2007; Curtis and Tallis 2008). Although Austen Henry Layard's famous reconstructions have been much criticized, they do provide a vivid impression of the rich, elaborate, and above all colorful palace decoration (see Figure 6.1 in Graff, this volume). While we can reconstruct parts of the interior decoration, it is still difficult to understand the relation between the decoration and the kinds of activities that took place in a given room. Thus, it is virtually impossible to determine the functions of most excavated rooms in Assyrian palaces, although the archaeological and textual evidence indicates a connection between the royal household, its economy, royal representation, and archives, as well as a religious dimension and the worship of ancestors in the associated crypts. By contrast, the imperial administration appears to have been dispersed in different buildings and even among the houses of the “Great” (the commanders) within the cities.

Following the Neo-Assyrian Empire's collapse, the center of power in Mesopotamia shifted to Babylon, capital of the Neo-Babylonian Empire (ca.

626–539 BCE). King Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE) in particular reshaped the entire city and reestablished it as the most important urban center in the world. As in Assyria, the three known new palaces were located not in the city's center, where one might assume the palaces of the Old Babylonian period lay near the Marduk sanctuary, but in the north. The areas the excavator Robert Koldewey designated as *Südburg* and *Hauptburg* were arranged opposite each other along a broad, elaborately decorated street that led from the Ishtar Gate to the city center (Heinrich 1984: 198–232; Miglus 2003–5). The *Sommerpalast*, however, lies at the northern edge of the outer city wall.

The plan of the *Südburg* is highly symmetrical, consisting of five large courtyards around which rooms are organized in separated groups. The traditional scheme of the *Hürdenhaus* is faintly recognizable among many groups of rooms, and the *Mittelsaalhaus* among a smaller number of groups; modifications and alterations indicate that these plans poorly accommodated the needs of the time, however. The separation of defined parts of the building was probably functional and was further emphasized by long corridors between them. Whereas most parts of the palaces are characterized by these groups of rooms, which accommodate a wide range of functions ranging from living quarters to units for administration and production and judicial courts, the northeastern corner exhibits a unique plan. This vaulted structure is *opinia communis* interpreted as the substructure for the famous hanging gardens of Babylon (Heinrich 1984: 207–9). On the basis of textual evidence, the second court from the east is identified as the location of the central law court; the throne room dominates the largest central court at its southern side. Both are connected by a large gate.

Although structural developments and alterations are evident, the palaces in the Assyrian cities and later in Babylon demonstrate that a limited number of basic architectural layouts were continuously used in Mesopotamia for over three millennia. It is difficult to judge whether such enduring traditions resulted from the imperatives of climate and technical capabilities, or from social requirements and practices. Clearly, however, the few architectural archetypes could serve as suitable spaces even given changing ethnic and social circumstances, arguably because of deep-seated cultural and religious continuities.

Palaces in Hittite Anatolia (ca. 1650–1180 BCE)

By comparison with the Syro-Mesopotamian world, a complex social hierarchy took much longer to develop in Anatolia north of the Taurus Mountains. Accordingly, the evolution of manifold urban structures and monumental architecture reflecting this development in archaeological terms

also took much longer. Only in the second half of the third millennium BCE can we detect at sites such as Kültepe, Alişar Höyük, and Norşuntepe the first signs of settlement planning and separation of functions, along with comparatively large official buildings that indicate a growing social stratification (Schachner 1999). The religious or political functions of most of these buildings are not yet clear to us, aside from those at Norşuntepe, which seem to have served as the palace of the local ruler of the Altnova (Hauptmann 1976). Recent discoveries of a monumental, probably palatial building of the second half of the third millennium at Kültepe point to close relations between the elites of Anatolia and the Syro-Mesopotamian world and indicate the roots of later developments (Ezer 2014: 6–11, fig. 1, 4–5). By the early second millennium, we can identify palaces as well as temples at sites such as Kültepe (Özgüç 1999), Acemhöyük, possibly Konya-Karahöyük, and Beycesultan (Lloyd and Mellaart 1965) (in general, Naumann 1971: 389–430). The close architectural relations among these buildings, which may extend to examples even much farther west in the Aegean (Schachner 2008), together with similar developments visible in glyptic and the arts, reveal that Anatolia was part of a far-reaching network of ideas.

In terms of plan, these buildings closely resemble Syrian palaces of the late third and early second millennium BCE, especially the palaces at Mari (Margueron 1982, 2014) and Qatna, although some are smaller. Since the religious structures unearthed at Kültepe also resemble the *Anten*-temple types of Syria and the Levant, official architecture in Anatolia was clearly strongly influenced by Syro-Mesopotamian cultures (Schachner 2006). From the rare finds in these buildings it is difficult to judge precisely how they were used, whether in an Anatolian or a Syrian way. Considering the strong Syro-Mesopotamian impact, especially in the fields of administration and the arts, however, one may assume a strong southern influence on at least some of the central Anatolian urban elite and thus also on the way these official buildings were used. This situation contrasts sharply with developments both in domestic architecture and in material culture in general, both of which clearly follow an Anatolian tradition continuing from the early third millennium until the end of the Hittite era (Schachner 1999).

Remarkably, from the early phases of the Hittite Empire onward, all forms of religious and royal representative architecture were built solely according to indigenous Anatolian forms, without any connection to previous layouts (Schachner 2006). This fundamental change in structural development can only be explained as a deep-rooted, very important turn in Anatolian history. The Hittites began to establish their own traditions of public architecture and city planning and used them until the empire's decline.

The central palace of the Hittite kings occupied the top of a large plateau known today as Büyükkale, overlooking the entire capital city of Hattusa (Neve 1982; Schachner 2012) (Figure 19.5). It consists of three major natural

terraces, artificially leveled and enlarged, separated from one another at different elevations, which in turn clearly separated different parts of the palaces from each other. The different topographical levels also function as large courts, which form the cores of distinct areas of the palace. Individual buildings, each assigned a different function and with an individual layout, are grouped around these courts. Judging by the plans of the buildings, and drawing on a cuneiform text describing the duties of the royal bodyguards, we may tentatively assign functions to different buildings (Güterbock and van den Hout 1991; van den Hout 2003–5; Schachner 2012).

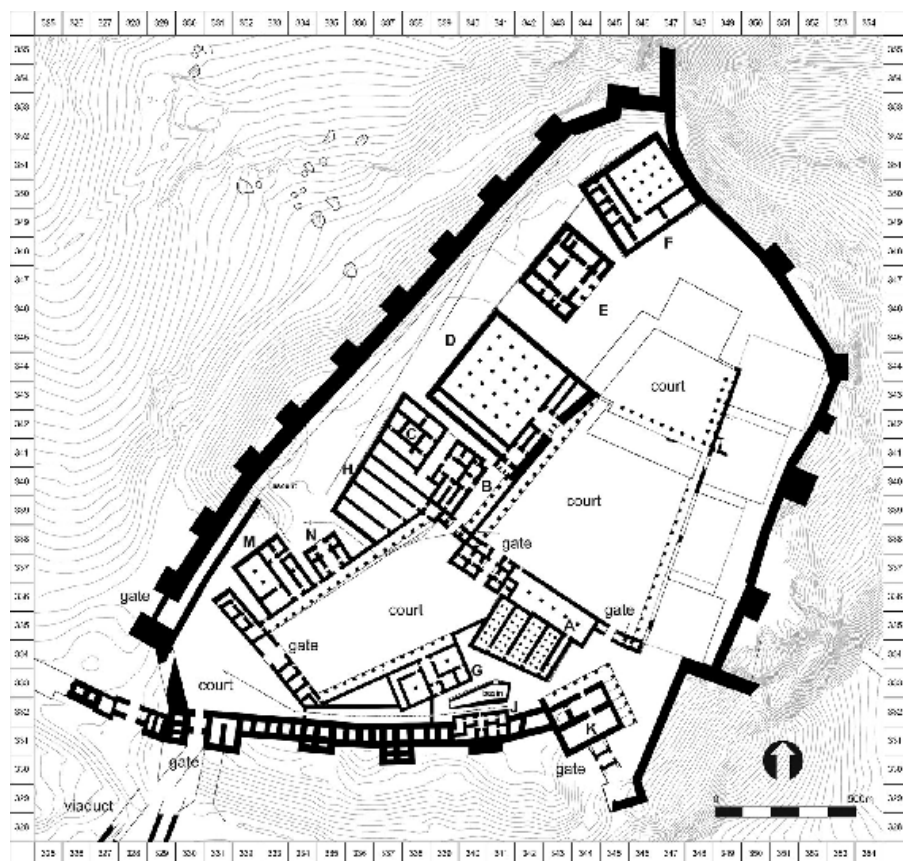


Figure 19.5 Boğazköy (ancient Hattusa), plan of Büyükkale, Period III (thirteenth century BCE).

Courtesy of the Archiv der Boğazköy-Expedition des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts.

Entering the palace compound from the south by means of a tall viaduct, which allowed the king to drive his chariot into the palace, the visitor first enters a small court of irregular shape (see Figure 19.5). Since the entrance and the exit gates are not located opposite one another, the visitor must orient

himself within the court. This means of asserting control over the visitor is regularly used in Hittite architecture. Through a second gate one enters the lower court, around which are located at least six buildings with different functions. Peter Neve (1982) reconstructed columned halls along its sides. Judging from the instruction for the royal bodyguards (Güterbock and van den Hout 1991), the first court served as a relatively public area for administrative and judicial sessions, although their precise locations are not clear. In its northwestern corner are a storage building (H) and two structures (B and C) of uncertain function. Although Neve (1982) interpreted them as religious structures, they might have served for the administration of the economic building nearby.

The second court is entered through a large gate, where stairs or a ramp helped overcome the difference in elevation (Neve 1982). West of this court, a columned hall (D) served as a reception hall; a large archive building (A) dominated the court's south side. Farther north, roughly half of the large court is divided by a columned hall. On the northwestern edge of the plateau and along the second half of the court lay buildings E and F, which Neve interpreted as royal apartments. Traces of foundations cut into the rocks on the eastern side of the upper court indicate additional buildings, of which nothing is preserved. The royal bodyguards text mentions a place of worship and various economic activities, which are not attested archaeologically. But the general separation of functions as described in the text, especially the differentiation between public and non-public areas, which are organized around two central courts, is visible in the archaeological evidence.

The plan of the Büyükkale palace and its organization around separate courts can be traced to the early periods of Hittite rule over Anatolia (seventeenth–sixteenth century BCE). The only building complex that might be cited as a parallel is a large, freestanding elite estate at Inandıktepe, dating to the sixteenth century BCE (Mielke 2006). Like Büyükkale, it is organized around two large courts, which are separated by a gate and a slight elevation. In contrast to the central palace on Büyükkale, administrative buildings of the Hittite imperial period (ca. 1450–1180 BCE) in several provincial cities—Tappigga (Maşat Höyük) (Özgüç 1982), Kayalıpınar, Kuşaklı, Ortaköy (Süel 2008), and Alacahöyük (Naumann 1971: 402, fig. 536)—share certain features of plan and decoration that permit their identification as “provincial palaces,” but which clearly distinguish them from the example in the capital.

Unlike the Syro-Mesopotamian region, where palaces clearly draw on architectural designs of long-standing tradition and that were also used for the dwellings of much of the population, the palace of the Hittite great kings shows scarcely any connection to the elite dwellings within Hattusa. Such buildings follow a traditional form that has its roots in the third millennium BCE (Neve 1978; Schachner 2015). Subsequently, during the sixteenth or early fifteenth century, a new house form was developed, which differs

considerably from palace architecture. Interestingly, there is a major difference in plan and thus internal organization between the palace at Hattusa and the Syro-Mesopotamian examples. Whereas the latter are always a single building with functional divisions achieved by separate internal areas, the Hittite palace on Büyükkale has a looser organization, whereby the multiple functions of the palace are located in independent buildings grouped around courts. The courts and the massive enclosure wall keep the structure together.

Remarkably, no architectural features of the Hittite period, either official or religious, survived the empire's breakdown. Like most characteristics of Hittite culture, their disappearance without a trace indicates that culturally the Hittites only rather superficially coined Anatolia and did not alter the course of long-term, structurally formative features.

During the Iron Age (ca. 1150–600 BCE) it took societies in central Anatolia several centuries again to reach a complex level of social organization. Although cities such as Gordion (Yassihöyük), Alişar Höyük, or Boğazköy exhibit a certain degree of social separation and hierarchy, it is difficult confidently to identify a particular building as a palace or temple, chiefly because each structure occurs only once and no diagnostic finds have come to light. Only at the site of Kerkenes Dağı, a short-lived city established on a high mountain on the northern border of Cappadocia during the sixth century BCE, a building complex may be labeled a palace because of its size, layout, and rich decoration (Summers 2007).

While in central Anatolia urban culture disappeared completely after the collapse of the Hittite Empire, in southeastern Turkey and northern Syria a mosaic of small states appeared. Excavations in several of these cities provide detailed insights into the region's official architecture (Naumann 1971; Miglus 2003–5; Pucci 2008; Gilibert 2011). The distinctive feature of the period is a plan characterized by an entrance embellished with one or two columns, as attested at Karatepe, Zincirli, Tell Tayinat, and Sakçagözü. Robert Koldewey was the first to interpret this particular arrangement with a part of the Assyrian palaces that texts label *būr-bilāni*. It lacks Hittite roots, but may be connected to an older, Middle Bronze Age Syrian tradition.

In contrast to central Anatolia, in eastern Anatolia social development reached the level of a complex society, with a ruling class and an archaeologically visible expression of power, only during the first millennium BCE. The growth of the dispersed local chiefdoms of Nairi into the large regional kingdom of Urartu during the mid- and late ninth century took place under strong influence from the south, from the Aramaean kingdoms of northern Syria or the Neo-Assyrian Empire. But despite these close ties with the south, the built environment visible in the architecturally uniform remains of Urartian royal sites such as Çavuştepe, Ayanis, Bastam, and to some degree also Van Kale, clearly represent an indigenous architectural development

(Forbes 1983). Each of these fortresses was built on a long and narrow rocky ridge, fortified by thick walls, and clearly separated from the residential areas at the foot of the citadels. Within these complexes, which had more the character of castles than palaces, existed a combination of individual buildings serving administrative, religious, economic, and representative functions.

If it is correctly dated to the Urartian period, the only exception may be the palace at Karmir Blur, whose complex architecture contrasts sharply with the fortresses known from the Lake Van region and northern Iran (Miglus 2003–5: 270). As in other examples, the palace quarter includes large storage areas probably organized according to types of goods stored, a typically quadrangular *susi*-temple, and representative components such as columned halls.

As with the Hittites, no architectural or structural elements of the Urartian fortresses were transmitted to later periods or other cultures. This situation reveals a clear cultural, political, and social break at the end of the Urartian era, around the mid-seventh century BCE.

Conclusions

Unlike most other archaeological features that reflect human behavior, palaces are comparatively late developments, since they evince the achievement of a comparatively high degree of social complexity. They occur only during the fourth millennium BCE after highly differentiated hierarchical societies were established and after power mechanisms were implemented to maintain these hierarchies over an extended period. This does not mean that earlier societies were not socially differentiated, but it demonstrates that a very high degree of differentiation is required to become archaeologically visible.

In Syro-Mesopotamia, buildings identified as palaces differ widely, both chronologically and regionally, in terms of plan and decoration. These variations are clearly due to the fact that individual decisions by the ruling elite deeply influenced the planning of such structures; a wider range of options was available in comparison with religious architecture, whose planning was predefined by cultural conditioning. Despite these variations, we can identify certain core architectural elements used for palaces, which represent long-standing cultural and social traditions. In this respect, despite their individual appearance, Syro-Mesopotamian palaces clearly reflect long-term, stable social traditions underlying short-term changes—be they political, social, or ethnic. Hence the palaces of Syro-Mesopotamia more closely resemble elite houses and even ordinary dwellings, in comparison with regions such as the Iranian highlands or Anatolia.

In contrast to Mesopotamian developments, the different areas of Anatolia reveal no durable traditions of fixed built forms. Here there was a “delay” in the evolution by which political structures became visible as a built environment. Moreover, individual and different forms developed in every region and in each period as a result of social heterogeneity, which in turn at least in part reflects geographical and topographical heterogeneity. The differences among the individual traditions, for example the Hittite and Iron Age peoples in central Anatolia, indicate deeply rooted cultural discontinuities, which are typical for areas with an unstable economic base, like Anatolia. On the other hand, in different areas and times people developed structurally comparable strategies to establish and secure the survival of complex societies. These goals are achieved by control over water and food—control that is archaeologically visible in highly developed hydrological structures (such as dams and irrigation systems) and large-scale storage facilities permitting the long-term preservation of grain as seeds.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The essays devoted to “palace” in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* provide useful surveys of archaeological and textual evidence (Miglus 2003–5; Postgate 2003–5; Sallaberger 2003–5; van den Hout 2003–5). Potts 2012 includes recent surveys treating the archaeology of states and empires in the ancient Near East. Boucharlat 2013 and Perrot 2013 discuss palaces in Achaemenid Iran.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

Rock Reliefs and Landscape Monuments

Ömür Harmanşah

Introduction

Fieldwork at rock reliefs and the study of stone monuments date to the earliest episodes of the archaeology of the Near East as a discipline. Throughout the early modern period, travelers and antiquarians who visited the lands of the Ottoman Empire and Iran frequently engaged with rock monuments as the most conspicuous material remains of remote antiquity. Among these ruins firmly embedded in the landscape, I consider both monuments that are carved onto bedrock—rock reliefs and inscriptions—and other kinds of “landscape monuments” (Glatz and Plourde 2011) constructed in the countryside, such as the Hittite sacred pool complexes at Eflatunpınar and Yalburt. These monuments often incorporate hieroglyphic and cuneiform inscriptions, and myriad pictorial representations, carved into the living rock. Such durable documents of ancient landscapes constituted windows into the archaeology of the region for the earliest modernist engagements with the countryside and its rich heritage ripe for the wildest scholarly imagination. The study of rock monuments was thus foundational for the field of ancient Near Eastern studies.

Rock monuments have been abundantly documented in drawings and photographs, and were extensively described in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by enthusiastic travelers trained in classical literature and historical geography (Seeher 2002). Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810–1895), a British political resident and military officer in Baghdad, for instance, was stationed in 1835 in Kermanshah, in western Iran. He soon traveled to the nearby rock monument of Bisotun (Behistun) and began to copy its trilingual cuneiform inscription in Akkadian, Old Persian, and Elamite commissioned by the Achaemenid king Darius I (522–486 BCE). Rawlinson’s repeated visits over the next few years culminated in his contribution toward deciphering the cuneiform script (Larsen 1996: 79–87). The Armenian-Iranian photographer Antoin Sevruguin (1840–1933) likewise took a deep interest in Iran’s ancient rock monuments while photographing Iranian landscapes and documenting the country’s cultural heritage (Figure 20.1) (Bohrer 1999). In his remarkable photographs of places such as Bisotun, Naqsh-e Rostam, Taq-e Bostan, Rayy,

and Hajiabad, Achaemenid and Sasanian rock monuments testify to the long cultural history of the Iranian landscape. At the same time, the Orientalist visual cliché of idling locals as contemporary witnesses renders the monuments in such representations appropriately distanced in the remote past.

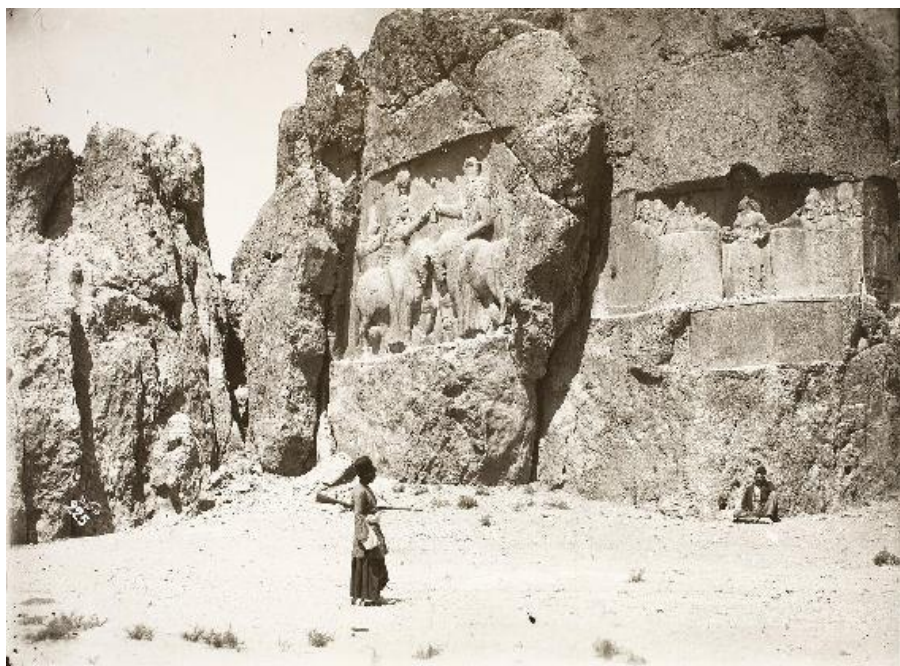


Figure 20.1 Naqsh-e Rostam, Sasanian reliefs depicting the investiture of Ardashir I (224–240 CE).

Print from photograph by Antoin Sevruguin, 1898–1902. Myron Bement Smith Collection, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Gift of Katharine Dennis Smith, 1973–1985. FS-FSA_ A. 4_2.12. Sm. 14.

The well-known rock sanctuary of Yazılıkaya located outside the Hittite capital Hattusa (modern Boğazköy) (Figure 20.2) was visited and documented by many nineteenth-century travelers, including French historian Charles Texier (in 1834); Scottish geologist William J. Hamilton (in 1836); a German explorer of Africa, Heinrich Barth (in 1858); French travelers Georges Perrot, Edmond Guillaume, and Jules Delbet (in 1861); American missionary Rev. Henry J. van Lennep (in 1864); German engineer Carl Humann (in 1882), whose plaster casts of the reliefs are now displayed in Berlin's Vorderasiatisches Museum; and British politician Henry Algernon George Percy, Earl Percy (Lord Warkworth) (in 1897).¹ Given that many of these travelers remained for extended periods, and drew and photographed the site, one may suggest that Yazılıkaya persisted as an active site of memory and continued to host image-making practices. Texier (1839) extensively

documented the site through a series of extraordinary illustrations, interpreting the carved figures as a meeting of Amazons and Paphlagonians in two processions—surely a consequence of his classical education.



Figure 20.2 Yazılıkaya, view of main chamber (A). Near Boğazköy (ancient Hattusa); thirteenth century BCE.

Photograph courtesy of Ann C. Gunter.

Yet these engagements of travelers and antiquarians with rock reliefs have a deeper history in the Middle East.² The seventeenth-century Turkish traveler and geographer Kâtip Çelebi visited the rock relief of King Warpalawas (ca. 740–705 BCE) at Ivriz in the northern foothills of the Taurus Mountains; he later described it in his *Kitâb-ı Cihânnümâ* and discussed the healing qualities of the nearby spring and its mud. He referred to the site as “Peygamber Pınarı,” literally the “Spring of the Prophet,” which in his time had become a pilgrimage site.³ Jean Otter, a Swedish-French traveler, seems to have visited Ivriz in January 1737 and later published a detailed account of his impressions of the relief, identifying the image of Tarhunzas as “Abris,” as the figure was locally known (Jean 2001: 151). These early modern accounts of rock monuments furnish an excellent cross section of Orientalist, local, national, and other imaginations of ruins in the landscape, while also providing reflections on the relationship of rock monuments to their immediate landscapes and to broader networked territories. These visits have also been intimately linked to the construction of historical geographies in the minds of classically educated travelers and antiquarians.

The spring site of Ivriz and its associated rock monuments furnish a remarkable example of a *place* where human engagement with a geologically

special locale results in a complex series of image-making events over the long term. These images and their evocative geological context of bedrock, mountainous scenery, and ice-cold water gushing from the rock through multiple mouths invite new forms of storytelling and cultural practice. While scholars have most often treated Warpalawas's famous relief as an isolated monument, recent archaeological work at and near Ivriz has shown that a series of rock reliefs and other monuments were set up at the site, including a second, identical relief in the Ambarderesi gorge; a Phoenician-Luwian bilingual stele; a rock-cut altar; a Late Iron Age fortress; and Byzantine monastic structures (Harmansah 2014b, with bibliography). The archaeological evidence demonstrates that rock relief sites are never really created through a single moment of act, or a state-sponsored inscription of a previously untouched place. Instead, they are almost always sites of long-term cultural practice and particular engagements with the remote past.

In this chapter I reconsider the widespread view that Near Eastern rock reliefs represent propagandistic fabrications of the political elite or geopolitical instruments mapping territorial power installed on the edges of imperial territories to define, and therefore survey and control, those territories. This traditional assumption takes inspiration from and breeds the colonial *terra nullius* discourse: the politically charged claim by imperial agents of the emptiness or uncultivated state of conquered landscapes, a prominent rhetoric in Western colonialist discourse of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries (Zukas 2005). In this context, significantly, the monumental inscriptions or annalistic texts of Near Eastern rulers in the Late Bronze and Iron Ages employ a similar rhetoric when describing their urban foundations. For Assyrian and Urartian rulers, for example, their new cities were built in “uncultivated wilderness” or at sites where “the rock was untouched.”⁴ Carving the natural rock surface could itself be associated with such colonial gestures of taking over landscapes and places; yet the *terra nullius* discourse takes its place in the colonial discourse precisely to erase or silence what previously existed in the colonized territories and to legitimize the colonial gesture itself. I suggest that a critical understanding of this rhetoric is crucial to investigating rock monuments of Near Eastern antiquity as places of continuous cultural engagement and memory, which often preceded their monumental inscription by imperial agents. I also advocate an archaeological approach to these sites in order to trace the genealogy of such places in earlier periods of history and evaluate the palimpsest of material engagements they represent.

Inscribing and Reinscribing Place

As a distinctive genre of ancient Near Eastern art and epigraphy, rock

monuments of Iran, Anatolia, Syro-Mesopotamia, and the Levant have been surveyed and studied in great detail in a series of catalogue-like treatments.⁵ They are traditionally interpreted as visual and verbal statements of imperial power at state frontiers combined with ritual or divine imagery, and consequently serve as tangible evidence to anchor historically known geographies to real and authentic places.⁶ Both approaches link the making of the rock monuments and the significance of their location to networks of state control and territorial power, and the mapping of those networked geographies (Canby 1989). These interpretations often rightly point out the monuments' association with political power. Jürgen Seeher (2009: 119), for example, saw Hittite rock reliefs "as a demonstration of power, a kind of territorial claim by the royal family," while Dominik Bonatz (2007) viewed them as an extraordinary amalgamation of royal ideology and religious visual rhetoric. Claudia Glatz and Aimeé Plourde (2011: 33) recently applied a "costly signaling theory" model to Late Bronze Age Anatolian rock monuments, arguing that the reliefs were "a medium through which ongoing territorial contests are moderated." Reviewing the complexity of a corpus of monuments within the broader sphere of the Hittite Empire, the authors went beyond understanding rock monuments simply as manifestations of power and insisted on the active role of image- and monument-making as a technology of domination in the negotiation of imperial landscapes (see also Glatz 2009). Yet network model-based and macro-scale perspectives on rock monuments also have the effect of removing rock-cut images and inscriptions from the specific context of the cultural landscapes that surround them.

Art historical approaches focusing on the stylistic and iconographic aspects of rock reliefs have been fundamental to identifying common visual idioms and sorting out the chaotic heterogeneity of the monuments as pictorial imagery (Kohlmeyer 1983; Bonatz 2007). The extraordinary mixing of deeply religious iconography with a powerful rhetoric of kingship has been extensively studied, especially for the Hittite, Neo-Assyrian, and Achaemenid monuments (Shafer 1998, 2007; Bonatz 2007; Feldman 2007; Root 2013). The Hittite Great Kings, and various rulers and princes of Anatolian kingdoms such as Tarhuntassa, Kizzuwatna, or Mira, for example, are often depicted in ceremonial garb interacting with the divine. We can compare the relief of Muwatalli II at Sirkeli in the Ceyhan River valley or of Tudhaliya IV at Yazılıkaya near Hattusa with representations of Neo-Assyrian kings, who are most often shown in a prayer gesture. Yet further study suggests that the visual vocabulary of each rock relief can be intimately linked to the monument's specific historical circumstances and location. Thus rock monuments are more than isolated expressions of power in the open landscape, and we should consider them as politically charged sites of image-making practices, where ideologies may have been contested.

When closely studied, the archaeological context of rock monuments provides

a wealth of information about their production and meaning. My own fieldwork has demonstrated that monuments with pictorial representations and monumental inscriptions are carved into the living rock at geologically spectacular locations: at the mouths of springs, caves, and sinkholes; on the vertical precipices along river gorges; at important mountain passes; at unusual rock formations or imperial “taskscape” such as quarries or quarried water canals; and above all in watery landscapes and along waterways (Harmanşah 2014b, 2015). As several examples discussed in this chapter illustrate, many are image-making interventions and acts of inscription by political agents that explicitly co-opt local places of power that are already sites of significance and long-term human engagement (Harmanşah 2007). These are “places of power”: symbolically charged, wondrous places such as sacred caves, particularly abundant springs, places of healing, apparitions or other miraculous events, or liminal sites where humans, dead ancestors and divinities are believed to interact. Writing about contemporary Serbia, the anthropologist Marko Živković explained “places of power” as

places that have become widely shared symbolic tokens in a particular polity because they accumulated many and varied layers of meaning. For instance, such places of renown or “power” tend to act as “pegs” or “anchors” not only in the “national geography of the mind,” but also in the “social frameworks of memory” on very intimate, personal and familial scales. In short, we need places to hang our life memories on, and the powers that be always seek to insert their ideology through these locations on which we drape our memories.

(Živković 2010: 169)

The memory of such cultural significance is often lost with the construction of the monument or the reinscription of place. An intriguing example from another cultural sphere is the case of the Mount Rushmore rock monument commemorating presidents of the United States with a strong visual link to the landscape. The heads of four presidents were carved in relief on a mountain sacred to Native Americans in the Black Hills of South Dakota (Doss 2010: 55). Beyond its overt propagandistic rhetoric of permanence and visual spectacle, the commemorative monument in a way derives its power and agency on a local or regional scale through the incorporation or “eating up” of the power of the place, in the sense of simultaneously destroying it and being nourished by it.⁷

More fundamentally, rock relief sites are often places of multiple acts of inscription and reinscription, rather than constituted by a single act of monument-making, as it is often assumed. At the Elamite pastoral landscape of Izeh/Malamir, in southwestern Iran, twelve rock reliefs and cuneiform inscriptions cluster around the upland basin of Izeh with two major lakes fed by those springs. Located at prominent springs or caves and along streams,

they are distributed among the sites of Kul-e Farah (6), Shekaft-e Salman (4), Shah Savar (1), and Xong-e Azda (1) (Álvarez-Mon 2013). These sites apparently witnessed multiple events of image-carving during the Middle Bronze and Early-Late Iron Ages. Noting the remarkable geological context of the Izeh basin rock monuments at natural springs and caves and their iconographic repertoire, Álvarez-Mon (2013: 229) proposes that “Elamite highland religious practices included ritual processions and the enactment of ceremonies in natural open-air sanctuaries ... and experience of [the] supernatural developed out of an association with landscapes of extraordinary natural properties.”

Assyrian rulers also revisited, re-carved, and reinscribed sites with which their ancestors engaged, such as the Source of the Tigris caves north of Diyarbakır in southeastern Turkey and the lesser-known site of Karabur near Antakya (Harmanşah 2007). At sites such as Sirkeli in the Ceyhan River valley and Karabel on the pass between Manisa and Izmir (Figure 20.3), Hittite and other Late Bronze Age rulers of Anatolia commissioned carved reliefs and inscriptions on multiple occasions. In his recent studies of Iranian rock reliefs, Matthew Canepa (2010, 2014) has analyzed how Sasanian reliefs were carved at sites inscribed by Achaemenid kings—and how such new carving activities at 750-year-old sites constituted performative engagements with local manifestations of the Persian past. Rock reliefs are sites where rather complex temporal relationships are observed, since they simultaneously fabricate futuristic utopias that project themselves into an anticipated future by adhering to the geological time of the bedrock, while engaging with the deeply historical topographies of power and acting as “a technology of memory.”



Figure 20.3 Karabel rock relief of “Tarkasnawa, King of Mira.” Near Manisa, Turkey; late thirteenth century BCE.

Photograph courtesy of Ann C. Gunter.

An extraordinary example of such practices of reinscription is the site of Nahr el-Kalb in western Lebanon, twelve kilometers north of Beirut, situated at an impressive watery landscape of a river gorge, where the Kalb River valley meets the Mediterranean coast near the prehistoric Jeita caves and spring (Kreppner 2002: 372–73; Volk 2008). In 1909, the German archaeologist Hugo Winckler wrote that Nahr el-Kalb “is a site suited, like few others, to contemplate the past and the interlinking of the fates of human beings.”⁸ At least twenty-two separate rock-carved monuments are attested, from several reliefs of the Dynasty 19 pharaoh Ramesses II to Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian rulers such as Esarhaddon and Nebuchadnezzar II; the Roman emperor Caracalla; Napoleon III; and the Lebanese president Bechara El Khoury in 1946. The site is a living and breathing place of state performance and landscape memory, where each inscription simultaneously establishes a particular relationship with local histories and imperial ideologies.

The archaeological evidence from rock relief sites reveals a great deal about their making as significant places through local practice, political intervention, events of image-making, and colonial monument building, all at once. This fact urges us to reconsider rock reliefs not as stand-alone monuments but as complex archaeological places or sites of memory and heritage with deep genealogies (Nora 1989). I now turn to a cross-cultural perspective on the political entanglements of rock monuments, from the earliest examples to later iterations.

Rock-Carving as Colonization of Landscapes and Places

Carving reliefs and inscriptions on the living rock is a practice attested across a wide geographical area in the ancient Near East in distinct episodes during the Bronze and Iron Ages. In the late third and early second millennium BCE, Elamite and Akkadian rulers carved an important cluster of rock monuments in the western foothills of the Zagros Mountains in Fars province, southwestern Iran. Among the earliest is the Kurangun rock relief in the Mamasani region of western Fars close to Fahliyan, near the northern tip of the Persian Gulf.⁹ At an impressive site of a mountain pass overlooking the Fahliyan River gorge and the alluvial plain of Rustam Yek, the rock face atop an outcrop of the Kuh-e Pataweh is carved into a throne or deep niche, representing multiple episodes of carving in antiquity (Figure 20.4). In the central panel are two seated divinities; the male figure sits on a serpent throne

and holds a pot from which spring waters emerge. The entire scene is raised on a representation of a flowing stream filled with fish, possibly alluding to a spring or river. To judge by iconographic parallels, the oldest part of the relief dates to the first half of the second millennium (perhaps seventeenth century BCE). In the Iron Age (eighth–seventh centuries BCE) a new section was added on either side of the main panel, with a strong visual relationship that acknowledges and highlights the centrality of the (by then) ancient pictorial composition (Potts 1999: 182).



Figure 20.4 Kurangun rock relief. Western Fars province, Iran; early second millennium BCE.

Photograph courtesy of Archives, Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

According to D. T. Potts (2013: 133), the Kurangun relief was apparently incorporated into a substantial Sasanian and early Islamic fortress-like settlement, although Wolfram Kleiss (1993) had argued for a possibly earlier date for the monumental structures with stone walls visible on the surface. Potts thus suggests that this “late” settlement (of presumably military character) has little to do with the rock reliefs, whose function he considered to be “religious”—even though the reliefs occupy the most prominent and monumental position in the fortress’s upper terrace.¹⁰ Yet it seems likely that the site of the rock reliefs relates intimately to bodies of sacred water such as the river or a nearby spring, enduring as a site of pilgrimage and cult practice in the Iron Age and revived in the late antique-early Islamic periods.

Three additional rock reliefs are situated in western Iran in the borderlands between Iraq and Iran: at Darband-i Gawr, Sarpol-e Zohab, and Shaikhan in the foothills of the Zagros Mountains overlooking the Diyala River valley

(Postgate and Roaf 1997; Glatz 2014). These monuments were carved along the dramatic river gorges that connected to the Diyala Valley, and are located precisely in a landscape contested between local Elamite communities and conquering Akkadian forces from southern Mesopotamia. This political contestation materialized into the visual rhetoric of the rock monuments that speak closely to the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin's stele depicting victory over the Lullubi, as the close affinity between the monument's iconography and style and the contemporaneous Darband-i Gawr relief demonstrates (Glatz 2014: fig. 6.4) (see Figure 14.4 in Downes, this volume). Is it possible to think of Naram-Sin's victory monuments both as raised in the urban context of southern Mesopotamia in the form of a stele, and in the mountainous locale of the contested region in the form of a relief carved into the living rock (Bahrani 2008: 101–14)? Or is it a relief carved by the craftsmen of a local ruler who inspired Naram-Sin, or by a later ruler, as others have suggested (Glatz 2014: 119–20)? Within the same contested region, the rock reliefs of local rulers participate in the same visual idiom. At Shaikhan, a rock relief with a similar image was carved in the Abbasan valley near a burial ground of local Sunni saints; it celebrates the victory of a local ruler possibly dating to the early to mid-second millennium BCE (Postgate and Roaf 1997: 149; Glatz 2014: 124–26). At Sarpol-e Zohab, located in Luristan near Qasr-e Shirin, are four different rock reliefs and inscriptions. One well-known relief depicts Anubanini, king of the Lullubi, both victorious (stepping on an enemy, holding a bow and arrow in likeness of the Naram-Sin posture, and accompanied by prisoners of war) and being invested with kingship by a female goddess, possibly Ishtar, who presents him with a ring (Postgate and Roaf 1997; Potts 1999: 318–19 and fig. 9.3; Glatz 2014: 123–24).

In the mountains dividing the Iranian plateau from the Mesopotamian plains was thus an active contesting and negotiating of borderlands between different polities. Remarkably, competing political entities adhered to a common visual rhetoric of kingship: representations of military victory, sovereignty, and violent subjugation of enemies; and legitimation through the appearance of the divine (in anthropomorphic form or as abstract symbols). In the absence of thorough archaeological investigation, a cursory comparison suggests that the choice of sites among these reliefs is also comparable, consistently linking themselves to springs, river gorges, and other watery landscapes. In south central Turkey is another contested region where the carving of rock reliefs became a technology of negotiating frontiers during the Late Bronze Age: the Zamantı Su valley, which connected and separated the Land of Hatti from the Mediterranean coastal state of Kizzuwatna. In the modern province of Kayseri, the Zamantı Su flows eastward through a semi-volcanic limestone-ignimbrite gorge walled in by lofty precipices, linking the fertile Develi plain at the foothills of Mount Erciyes with the Mediterranean coast. In the last two centuries of the Hittite Empire, four major rock reliefs were carved along this gorge: Firaktın, Imamkulu, Taşçı, and Hanyeri.

Fıraktın is the northernmost rock monument in the valley system, carved on a volcanic bedrock façade overlooking a tributary of Zamantı Su and a lush river basin (Figure 20.5). Several cup marks and circular basins, perhaps connected with specific practices relating to the monument, appear on the ignimbrite pumice-flow platform immediately above the relief. One and a half kilometers west-northwest of the relief, in the floodplain of Kara Su, is an impressive settlement mound known locally as Fıraktın Höyük (Ehringhaus 2005: 59–65; Stokkel 2005: 172; Ullmann 2010: 220–21; 2014). Excavations conducted here in 1947 and 1954 revealed Late Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Roman levels (Özgüç 1948). In the later phases of the Late Bronze occupation was a burnt building with cyclopean andesite walls, which the excavators dated to the Hittite Imperial period on the basis of associated ceramics and metal finds (Özgüç 1955).



Figure 20.5 Fıraktın rock relief with Hattuşili III and Queen Puduhepa. Near Develi, Kayseri, Turkey; thirteenth century BCE.

Photograph courtesy of Ann C. Gunter.

The Fıraktın relief itself depicts the royal couple, the Hittite Great King Hattuşili III (1267–1237 BCE) and Puduhepa, pouring a libation in front of the Storm God Tarhunzas and the seated Hepat respectively, who are identified in the accompanying hieroglyphic Luwian inscription. The text refers to Puduhepa as “great queen, daughter of Kizzuwatna, having become god” (Ehringhaus 2005: 64; Bonatz 2007: 112–14). At least some of the Hittite rock relief monuments should probably be associated with the “Divine Stone House” (É NA₄) or *hekur* (NA₄.*hekur*. SAG.UŠ) monuments that are frequently mentioned in the texts. As Theo van den Hout (2002: 91) has argued, NA₄.*hekur*. SAG.UŠ must have been a funerary monument to deceased royal ancestors. More than isolated monuments, he observes, they were also “large self-supporting institutions employing cultic, administrative, and other personnel, and mostly enjoying some kind of tax exemption.”

The topographical settings of the other rock relief sites in the region differ considerably from one another, despite their chronological and functional interrelationship. Two sets of Taşçı carvings (referred to as Taşçı A and Taşçı B, about one hundred meters apart) occupy a modest, non-monumental setting in a narrow river gorge (Şamaz Dere) on a rather low surface on the rock. Based on the style of carving, they can be more precisely described as graffiti. J. D. Hawkins has translated a short inscription on one relief as “Manazi, daughter of Lupaki the Army-Scribe (son of ?) Zida the MEŠEDI-man, servant of Hattušili” (cited in Ehringhaus 2005: 68; Glatz and Plourde 2011: 47). Numerous caves and caverns are attested nearby. About ten kilometers east of the Taşçı reliefs is Imamkulu, carved on a freestanding, boulder-like rock near an abundant spring; its location overlooks a spectacular plain, in front of a bedrock cliff façade like Fıraktın and Taşçı (Ehringhaus 2005: 70–76). Atop the cliff above Imamkulu are numerous circular cuttings associated with this relief, again reminiscent of Fıraktın’s setting. The Luwian hieroglyphs identify the monument’s sponsor as “Prince Ku(wa)lanamuwa” or “Ku(wa)lamuwa” (Ehringhaus 2005: 73). The pictorial scene features and honors the Weather God. Finally, Hanyeri is located on the southern side of the Gezbel pass over the Bey Dağı range, along a route now infrequently used; the relief, near a spring, overlooks yet another river gorge (Ehringhaus 2005: 70–80). It is carved relatively high on the rock (approximately four meters above ground level) and, unlike the other three monuments, was clearly intended to be visible from a distance. The iconography is familiar: a warrior figure holds a bow and spear, as at other Hittite rock monuments such as Karabel near Manisa (see Figure 20.3) and Hatip near Konya. As at Imamkulu, the Luwian inscription at Hanyeri identifies the figure as “Prince Ku(wa)lanamuwa”; here he encounters a mountain god identified as Sarruma.

Very likely, Fıraktın, Taşçı (A and B), and Imamkulu are associated with the specific geological context of the Zamantı Su valley and were carved in close association with the spectacular rock façades of the gorge or near it. The reliefs belong to an assemblage of rock cuttings, building and settlement remains, and other archaeological features, which suggest long-term ritual use and repeated visits. While not all the monuments seem to have been directly sponsored by Hittite Great Kings who resided at the capital Hattusa, local rulers and elites must have been responsible for making and maintaining them. In their iconographic details and more discursively in the hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions, they lay claim to imperial Hittite iconographies and titles and connect themselves with the central power in the empire. Perhaps equally significantly, these monuments constitute and appropriate sites where ritual practices are housed with a special geological context associated with the underworld, ancestor cult, and divinities.

Finally, as discussed earlier, Hittite craftsmen created an extramural open-air rock-cut sanctuary at Yazılıkaya outside their capital city, Hattusa (see Figure

20.2) (Seeher 2011). This unique complex of multiple natural rock galleries not only brings together the “Thousand Gods of Hatti” from across the Hittite countryside and the empire’s frontiers, but also constitutes a site of burial and ancestor veneration for a prominent Hittite king, Tudhaliya IV. Here a series of relatively flimsy stone structures encloses a prominent rock shelter, probably a natural spring in antiquity. Jürgen Seeher (2011: 19) describes evidence for two large artificial water basins just downslope from Yazılıkaya, which strengthens the possibility that the rock formation lay where spring waters emerged (see Marsh and Jones 2014). The rock chambers were in regular use long before the Hittite state was established, particularly during the Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Ages (Seeher 2011: 142). The reliefs on the sanctuary walls depict multiple deities in linear processions and a central scene of meeting, where the Storm God and the Sun Goddess of the Earth appear together. The gods of the underworld and mountain deities seem to dominate the processions, conforming with the Hittite association of springs, caves, and sinkholes as orifices of the earth and thus points of contact and communication with the underworld, the world of ancestors (Gordon 1967). The entire program points to a “great assembly” of the divinities of the land on the occasion of Hattusa’s urban festivals such as the AN.TAH.ŠUM.

With its geological and architectural setting, the Yazılıkaya rock sanctuary suggests that such rocky landscape features coupled with a spring may have been considered as sites where divinities presented themselves in miraculous episodes of divine epiphany. Hittite mythological texts frequently mention divinities who disappear and reappear (Gordon 1967). Like the modern pilgrimage sites of Marian apparitions often located at prominent springs and functioning as places of healing, Hittite rock reliefs may have related to stories of such miraculous pronouncements of the divine; the image-making that marks such spots may have commemorated such a memorable event. That many rock relief sites were later associated with saints and other holy individuals, and with miraculous healing, supports this hypothesis.

Apparitions on the Living Rock

Elamite and Hittite practices involved carving the living rock with divine and royal images, and pictorial scenes that mixed historical actors with divinities in acts of ritual or veneration. Complex designs that incorporate monumental inscriptions continued during the Iron Age across Near Eastern landscapes with much enthusiasm by Syro-Hittite (especially Luwian-speaking Anatolian), Assyrian, Urartian, Phrygian, and Babylonian elites. The Neo-Assyrian practice of raising commemorative monuments along their empire’s frontiers is well attested through textual, visual, and archaeological evidence (Morandi Bonacossi 1988; Shafer 1998, 2007). The *narû* monuments were

commonly fashioned as steles at the conquered city gates or public spaces and in the form of rock reliefs at symbolically charged locales in the countryside, as at the Source of the Tigris River at Birkleyn caves (Harmanşah 2007; Schachner 2009); the Source of the Subnat River (Shafer 1998: 139–42; Yamada 2000: 274); at sites along rivers and canal systems, such as the Gomel River north of Khinnis (Shafer 1998: 284–89); or at the previously marked site of the mouth of Nahr el-Kalb in Lebanon (Roche 2009). In analyzing the construction of the Neo-Assyrian imperial periphery, Ann Shafer (1998, 2007) has shown that such monuments were more than political statements of domination and power: they negotiated the discourse of appropriation and conquest while simultaneously constituting sites of ritual practice and appropriating places of local and trans-local significance. These monuments received offerings and sacrifices, but they also presented a gesturing image of the king in constant communication with the divinities of the place. Assyrian texts describe such monuments as featuring an “image [*šalmu*] of kingship,” where *šalmu* is not a mimetic but a performative form of representation that enables the king’s presence (Bahrani 2003: 121–48; Nadali 2012). These monuments therefore ceremonially anchor the cult of the traveling Assyrian king at well-known holy places and link them to local topographies of ritual and power. The making of images, carving of inscriptions, and other commemorative events during Assyrian military expeditions therefore can be considered moments of negotiation between the wandering king and the subjugated locality, where the Assyrian images and inscriptions are brought out to perform a colonial gesture of co-opting.

The Iranian and southeast Anatolian interest in rock monuments continued with the Achaemenid dynasty, the Orontid Commagenean kings of the late Hellenistic period, and the Sasanian dynasty. These rock reliefs provide good examples of sites where multiple carving events are attested, sometimes hundreds of years apart, but perhaps more importantly continued the commemoration of ancestral lineages and deep histories of place. As continuously revisited sites of commemoration, rock reliefs are not isolated images and inscriptions out in the landscape; they are durable, long-term sites of inscription, public ceremony, and social engagement. Matthew Canepa (2010) has recently discussed the carving of Sasanian reliefs at sites of Achaemenid heritage, demonstrating that such new carving events at already ancient sites constituted performative engagements with local manifestations of the Persian past. The site of Naqsh-e Rostam offers an intriguing example. Located eight kilometers north of the Achaemenid royal center of Persepolis, the site housed one of the oldest Elamite rock reliefs, dating from the early second millennium BCE, and a series of Achaemenid rock-cut tombs beginning with Darius I (522–486 BCE) (Canepa 2010: 574). Remarkably, in the third and early fourth centuries CE the Sasanian kings added eight new rock relief monuments, each ruler directly linking his own genealogy to the Achaemenid past (Canepa 2013, 2014).

In many of the geographically widespread and diverse cultural contexts thus far discussed, rock reliefs tended to be placed at sacred or hydro-geologically significant spots where the rock image provides a liminal representational medium that established a performative engagement with the divinities of the place, its ancestral past, and its local storytelling practices. Across different cultural contexts, an interest in returning to previously carved places or landscapes for new episodes of inscription and image-making prevails. Sasanian rulers placed their rock monuments alongside those of Achaemenid kings. Assyrian rulers returned for new episodes of carving to symbolically charged sites such as the Source of the Tigris, Karabur, or Nahr el-Kalb. The Luwian-speaking rulers of Tabal returned to the watery landscapes of Ivriz to re-carve the scene that brought together Tarhunzas and Warpalawas. The famous mountain pass between Torbalı and Manisa at Karabel (see [Figure 20.3](#)) was marked with multiple reliefs and inscriptions over a lengthy period. Such persistent and reiterative practices at rock relief sites further emphasize that these monuments had little to do with a macro-regional ideology of surveillance and control of specific landscapes or marking networks of territorial governance. Instead, they chiefly concerned the continued articulation and animation of places of power or the co-option of site-specific practices of local communities.

Conclusions

In the year 2000, Annaliese Peschlow-Bindokat ([2002](#)) and her team discovered rock-carved hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions at Suratkaya, the site of a remote rock shelter on the Latmos (Beşparmak) Mountain near Bafa in western Turkey. The inscriptions, which celebrate a ruler of the local kingdom of Mira (Peschlow-Bindokat and Herbordt [2001](#)), generated considerable excitement and were immediately incorporated into research on the historical geography of the Hittite Empire and its western expansion. Yet the rock inscription only makes sense in the extraordinary context of its micro-landscape with a deep prehistory of serving as a holy mountain and a site of image-making practices. The rock shelter is situated in one of the most intensively inscribed holy mountains of the prehistoric Near East dedicated to the Anatolian weather god, where the German Archaeological Institute surveyed literally hundreds of rock paintings and carvings. I suggest that the Suratkaya rock inscriptions speak directly to this enduring tradition of landscape veneration. The cultural history of landscapes in which rock monuments are placed continues to furnish a complex set of local relationships and long-term, place-based histories, whether they involve territorial contestation, acts of commemoration, or practices of storytelling or pilgrimage.

Rock monuments are carved into the living rock at geologically unusual places, especially ones associated with bodies of water and karstic formations: springs, deep river gorges, lakes, mouths of caves and sinkholes, but also mountain peaks, mountain passes, and “taskscape” such as quarries. In this way, they are almost always located at sites of long-term human interaction with the mineral world, where bodies are exposed to the elements of local geologies. It comes as no surprise that several Anatolian rock monuments, such as Ivriz and Eflatunpinar, were associated in medieval times with saints, healing pilgrimages, and miracles. Rock reliefs are most significantly provocative because of their complex temporalities: they evoke the heritage of place in the deep past while attempting to reach future generations through the durability of stone, adhering to the temporality not of social time, but of geological time, which serves as a metaphor for eternity. When one looks at their cultural biographies, the rock monuments are heritage places, where creative engagements with the past and new forms of storytelling take place.

The existing literature on rock monuments largely understands them as isolated, single-event monuments in the landscape. I have sought to emphasize instead that these sites are complex assemblages of human practice, places constituted since antiquity by multiple visits, multiple carving events, commemorations, and pilgrimages. Their cultural biographies can be accounted for continuously, from their fashioning to their celebration today as sites of heritage. They can be characterized as an assemblage of site-specific performances, theaters of state spectacles, and durable acts of inscription.

Finally, when rock monuments are explained in the official discourse of political elites who sponsor them, they are portrayed in the context of *terra nullius*: a blank slate that legitimizes the colonial takeover. Carving the living rock is conveniently associated with a previously untouched place, although archaeology usually offers abundant evidence to the contrary. Carving the rock, then, is associated with coloniality and colonial violence, where constructed notions of “nature” appear in the colonial discourse. Here we can speak about rock relief sites as political ecologies, where local cultural practices and imperialist interventions clash.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Catalogues providing detailed documentation of rock reliefs and landscape monuments in the Near East include Börker-Klähn 1982 and the series *Iranische Denkmäler* (Berlin, 1932–). New perspectives on monuments from a wide geographical and chronological range are assembled in the volume Harmanşah 2014a.

The Anatolian monuments of the Late Bronze and Iron Ages have been extensively reinvestigated in recent years. For the Hittite monuments, see in particular Ehringhaus 2005, Seeher 2011, and Harmanşah 2015 (with extensive bibliography). For the Iron Age, see Ehringhaus 2014 and Harmanşah 2015.

Shafer 1998 provides a detailed investigation of Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs; see also Harmanşah 2007, Shafer 2007, and Schachner 2009.

Glatz 2014 explores concepts of landscape and monumentality, with special reference to late third-millennium monuments in the western Zagros region. Recent studies of the Achaemenid and Sasanian rock monuments include Canepa 2013 and 2014 (both with further references).

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NOTES

1. Seeher (2011: 173–88) offers a detailed recent overview of the early exploration of Yazılıkaya. For beginnings of broader Hittite archaeology, see also Jean 2001.

2. A frequently mentioned early example of such an interaction is Herodotus's (*Histories* 2.106.1–15) account of the Hittite rock relief at Karabel near Manisa (see [Figure 20.3](#)), which he considered the work of the Egyptian pharaoh Sesostris. See also Jean [2001](#): 149. Many early travelers who saw the Karabel relief, such as Charles Texier, followed Herodotus's interpretation. According to David Hawkins's ([1998](#)) recent reading of its inscription, the relief represents Tarkasnawa, king of Mira.
3. See Rojas and Sergueenkova [2014](#): 155. Hasan Bahar, who discovered the rock relief of Kurunta, king of Tarhuntassa (thirteenth century BCE) at Hatip Springs outside Konya, reports that prior to the archaeological identification, local inhabitants referred to the carved figure's feet as "the feet of the prophet" (personal communication). See also Bahar [1996](#).
4. Examples include the inscriptions of the Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE) on his founding of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (Tulul Al 'Aqar), and the Urartian king Rusa II (ca. 685–651 BCE) on the founding of Rusahinili Eiduru-kai (Ayanis) (Harmanşah [2013](#): 25–28).
5. Hittite rock reliefs have been studied by Kohlmeyer (1988) and Ehringhaus ([2005](#)), although these surveys address only the Late Bronze Age monuments of the Anatolian peninsula. Shafer's ([1998](#)) dissertation on the peripheral monuments of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Börker-Klähn's ([1982](#)) monograph on stelae and rock monuments include a comprehensive overview of the rock reliefs. Rossner's ([1987](#), [1988](#)) "archaeological guides" to Hittite and Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs in Turkey should also be noted. Morandi Bonacossi ([1988](#)) and Emre ([2002](#)) have published survey articles on Assyrian and Hittite rock monuments respectively. No study to date has connected the Bronze and Iron Age rock monuments in a single analysis. For a long-term history of Iranian rock reliefs, see Debevoise [1942](#).
6. See, for example, a recent discussion of the Hatip monument in relation to the Hittite border with Tarhuntassa (Simon [2012](#): 688–89). Thompson ([2008](#): 299) discusses Sasanian rock reliefs as "individual capsules of information on the general political, religious, historical and artistic milieu of the time." The carving of reliefs and inscriptions into living bedrock suggests that these monuments should be perceived as more authentic or real, as permanent records of locality.
7. I owe this "eating" and "nourishing" metaphor to my colleague Nick Shepherd.
8. Winckler [1909](#), quoted in Volk [2008](#): 291. A special issue of *Baal: Bulletin d'Archéologie et d'Architecture Libanaises*, Hors-serie V (2009) is devoted to the site.

9. See Debevoise 1942: 78–80; Vanden Berghe 1986; Seidl 1986; Kleiss 1993; Potts 1999: 182; 2013: 132–33.
10. In 2007, D. T. Potts and A. J. Zadeh opened a sounding in one of the monumental buildings near the Kurangun relief. While Potts (2013: 133) reported the presence of Elamite and Achaemenid material, he dated the building chiefly to “Sasanian and Islamic” periods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Reconstructing Artistic Environments

Mehmet-Ali Ataç

Introduction

Among the persistent questions posed in studying the art of the ancient Near East are the identity and background of master artists. Attempts to reconstruct artistic environments in any ancient culture entail knowing about the creative process and the world of ideas connected with such artists and expressed in art. Yet neither aspect of artistic production is readily available in the texts discovered to date. Although the written correspondence and visual record of the Neo-Assyrian (ca. 883–612 BCE) court provides information on royal building programs (Parpola 1995), the production of royal statuary (Winter 1997: 366–69; and see below), and royal quarrying (Barnett, Bleibtreu, and Turner 1998: pls. 96–119), these sources do not elaborate on the intellectual agendas and thought processes of master artists or learned supervisors in codifying royal iconographic programs. Names of sculptors are recorded in texts of the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2900–2334 BCE), and in one unique instance the base of a stele reveals its maker's name; but further information on sculptural practices is rare (Evans 2012: 123–24). Likewise, the archives of Old Babylonian Mari document court artisans and craftsmanship (Gates 1990; Sasson 1990), but they do not elucidate the identity, status, and intellectual sources of those who created the figural and ornamental compositions in painting and sculpture recovered from the palace.

Information on craftsmen or artisans such as potters, carpenters, leatherworkers, and metalworkers, primarily in the form of lists of professions or ration allotments, is available in Mesopotamian administrative documents from several periods, chiefly the Early Dynastic, Ur III (ca. 2112–2004 BCE), Old Babylonian (ca. 2000–1600 BCE), and Neo-Babylonian (ca. 626–539 BCE) (Renger 1996; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 230). Many such artisans, especially those who worked in the production of stone sculpture and luxury goods, were associated with temple and palace households; some may have worked independently for private markets of local populations as well (Renger 1996: 217–19; Neumann 1996; Steinkeller 1996). Several studies have addressed the implications of artisanal circles for ancient Mesopotamian economy and society. Here, I focus instead on the question of artists and artistic practices that pertained directly to the transmission of ideological or scholarly (for historical periods) notions, particularly in the iconographic

programs of royal courts. Even though it is difficult to delineate a category of “fine art” or “high art” within a wider environment of craftsmanship in ancient Near Eastern societies (Nadali 2014; Baines 2015), such a distinction inevitably emerges when one considers these particular kinds of ideas, which the visual arts could convey. To that end, I emphasize the challenges of reconstructing the environments associated with artistic practices revolving around master supervisors of monumental and iconographic programs, rather than artisanal output as a whole.

As with many ancient and traditional societies, in the ancient Near East we find limited evidence for correspondence among master artists, contemporary scholars, and rulers concerning artistic or iconographic ideas—which does not mean that such communication did not exist orally and was not fundamental to artistic production. Texts dating to the reigns of the Neo-Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668–ca. 630 BCE) have yielded suggestive clues on this subject. For instance, a letter to the king reveals disagreement among experts concerning the configuration of a royal image; the ruler is consulted about his preference on how the debate should be resolved (Cole and Machinist 1998: no. 34). Another letter asks the king’s approval for a newly fashioned royal image modeled after already existing ones depicting the king facing the exiled god Bel in the Assur Temple (Cole and Machinist 1998: no. 178). As remarkable as they are, such references to artistic consultation and debates do not extend to more detailed and clear discussions of matters of imagery and its meaning, which would certainly be too much to expect in any event from a textual tradition that is, by and large, sparse, laconic, and often oblique. Such texts provide precious little evidence for artistic practices at the level of conception and design, and the true purpose behind them may be enigmatic.

The sacral connotations of artistic production at the level of royal patronage, however, are clear in a text from the reign of Esarhaddon that describes the renewal of divine statues, from its initial stage of conception by the king to the selection of the artists in its execution (Walker and Dick 2001: 25–26). The scheme presented by the text is as convoluted as the steps that lead to Gudea’s (ca. 2100 BCE) rebuilding of the Eninnu, the temple of Ningirsu at Girsu, described in Cylinder A. It begins with Esarhaddon’s receiving from oracles favorable signs for the renewal, followed by a poetic declaration by the king that only the gods themselves are worthy of fashioning such images. A second round of divination is conducted to ascertain that the renewal should indeed be performed, whereby Esarhaddon is given not only the final approval but also the names of the craftsmen who should work on this project. The text blurs the boundaries between the gods, the true artisans, the king as the agent of the whole enterprise, and the craftsmen, “knowledgeable in mysteries,” who have “pure hands” (Walker and Dick 2001: 25–26). The king as the fashioner of his own image is a trope found in texts associated with Early

Dynastic statuary (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 161–62; Evans 2012: 125); and if there were instances of the royal image treated as divine and given cult, as is suggested by the Gudea texts (Winter 1992) and the Neo-Assyrian evidence (Cole and Machinist 1998: 14–15), then the divine qualities of the king are mirrored by those of the most proficient craftsmen, whose practices could in a way be qualified both as royal and divine in magnitude. What ties all artistic practices and artisanal production in the ancient Near East together, however, is their having taken place within circles of high-level professional skill (Renger 1996: 212) and possibly initiation, with the god Enki/Ea presiding over the entire realm of artistic creation and craftsmanship in ancient Mesopotamian culture.

Many scholars of ancient Near Eastern art now acknowledge that even though texts can assist in illuminating images, they cannot explain all their aspects, in that images in their own right were likely the media of special knowledge (Winter 1997: 359; Bahrani 2002: 15; Ataç 2010b). The complexity, iconographic richness, and aesthetic quality of both the figural and ornamental repertoires of surviving works of art speak to the presence in them of layers of meaning and knowledge of the highest intellectual order. Beyond technical knowhow, such knowledge likely entailed lore of a metaphysical kind not always suitable to be written down due to its restricted circulation, the lack of a tradition of discursive philosophical writing in the cuneiform world, and its more cogent transmission through visual means than through the written word. Those responsible for creating and supervising artistic projects must have possessed knowledge of this kind; and hence the uses of delineating a category of “master artists” or “supervisors,” who would have played the chief role in artistic creative processes. These masterminds surely drew on the capabilities of artisans and other technical personnel in the physical execution of major projects, and they themselves likely commanded more than one artistic technique. In the ancient Near Eastern sphere, these master artists are almost entirely anonymous, as was no doubt dictated by tradition. Just as art was not a medium of individual self-expression and creativity, the identities of its agents were not emphasized.

For ancient Egypt, we are better informed about certain high-profile artistic and architectural supervisors, who were also priests. Examples include Imhotep, the architect of Djoser’s Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara (Dynasty 3, 2630–2611 BCE) (Lauer 1999: 13), and Amenhotep Son of Hapu, the supervisor-architect of the monuments of Amenhotep III (Dynasty 18, 1391–1353 BCE) (Kozloff, Bryan, and Berman 1992: 45–48; Blyth 2006: 110). Both were deified and treated as sages in later Egyptian antiquity. In Egypt, such figures belonged to the members of the elite, who “were not just aesthetic consumers or audiences, but also patrons, project directors, administrators, and to some extent designers or executants” (Baines 2015: 6). The royal-sponsored art and architecture of neighboring ancient western Asia

would have demanded comparable master supervisors.

We lack precise understanding of the intrinsic meaning of crucial images from the ancient Near East, obstructing our ability to envisage the influence of master artists in the intellectual life of the courts with which they were associated. We readily assume that art served to glorify and legitimize kings and gods, and that rulers were themselves chief players in artistic decision-making processes. This perspective pays too little attention to art as bearer of meaning connected with knowledge of a sacral kind, the beyond, and related conceptions of enlightenment, which in turn must have informed any expression of what we vaguely refer to as “royal ideology.”

Thus, in this chapter I focus on the world of speculative knowledge conveyed particularly by visual imagery connected with the artistic output of ancient Near Eastern cultures, primarily Mesopotamia, rather than artisanal knowhow, craftsmanship, and technical production—although the latter were integral to paradigms of special or esoteric knowledge characterizing artistic production (Winter 2008). I define *artistic environment* as the intellectual milieu in which master artists worked, and I propose that the key to understanding and reconstructing these environments lies in approaching and interpreting the iconographic record in ways that go beyond politics, economy, and royal or dynastic legitimacy. I foreground the artists as possessors of special knowledge and creators of an encoded, if not encrypted, visual language in its expression. To that end, I present selected instances that betray most cogently the artists’ role in visually configuring ideas, and their environment as one of religious experience and communication among learned experts.

In doing so, I concur with some of the principal objectives and conclusions of Ann C. Gunter’s introductory chapter in *Investigating Artistic Environments in the Ancient Near East*, namely, that the nontechnical or intangible aspects of artistic production are difficult to access through documentation, and that one needs to look at the art itself more closely for appropriate cues in matters of aesthetic and semantic conception. Gunter (1990a: 15) concludes: “There are, in sum, a wealth of untapped sources available for investigating artistic environments in the ancient Near East.” I wish to draw attention to some of those “untapped sources.”

Artistic Environments of the Prehistoric Near East

Among the earliest and most revealing instances of artistic environments in the ancient Near East are certain Neolithic sites where the visual arts appear to have played a key role in social and religious spheres. Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori in southeastern Anatolia from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (ca. 10,000–7000 BCE), and Çatalhöyük in south central Anatolia from Pottery

Neolithic (ca. 7000–6000 BCE), display elaborate programs of sculpture and painting in association with sacred space, domestic or otherwise (Schmidt 2006; Hodder 2006b; Özdoğan and Başgelen 2007; Özdoğan, Başgelen, and Kuniholm 2011). Understanding these programs has been among the top priorities of prehistorians (Hodder 2006a: 14–15, 21), who have drawn attention to the visual arts as a system of communication like writing, on the one hand, and to shamanic knowledge underlying the relevant imagery, on the other (Schmidt 2006: 216–20, 221–26; Özdoğan 2007: 19).

Current approaches to the art of such Neolithic communities compellingly exemplify an endeavor to reconstruct artistic environments, and should also serve as a model for investigating the artistic record of historical periods. Due to the by and large egalitarian nature of Neolithic society and its lack of state systems and written records, matters of royal or political legitimacy, economy, and propaganda do not dominate academic discussions. Scholars can therefore more easily probe artistic production at the level of pristine paradigms thus far neglected in studying the visual arts of historical eras. These paradigms, which belong primarily to the world of metaphysics and shamanic symbolism, would not have died out following prehistoric times, but were instead translated or integrated into visual expressions of state ideology in historical periods (Stein 2006). We should thus postulate continuity between the kind of knowledge communicated by Neolithic art and that embedded in the art of historical periods, implying an analogous link in the identity, practices, and environments of artists across the ages.

Shamans, shamanism, and shamanic symbolism have become familiar terms in studies of monumental art of the Neolithic, best represented by the imagery preserved at Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and Çatalhöyük, and in approaches to depictions on prehistoric painted pottery, especially from the Chalcolithic Susa I culture (ca. 4000 BCE). Some scholars are critical of applying *shaman* and *shamanism* to cultures other than those characterized by shamanism strictly defined and historically identified, as in Central Asia and Siberia (Klein et al. 2002; Zhmud [1994] 2012: 207–20). Here, I am sympathetic to the “looser” use of the terms found today in the scholarship on the Near Eastern Neolithic in referring to a wider religious phenomenon of ecstatic states and the experience of the world beyond the senses on the part of special human beings with special technical-spiritual skills, who in turn exercised a crucial role in enabling the link between the divine and social spheres (Eliade [1951] 1972: 4–8; Hodder 2006b: 196; Root 2005a). Thus, for the Neolithic art of the Near East, a shaman may be defined as an individual with such special forces, whose religious world finds expression in his community’s visual arts.

Scholars of the Near Eastern Neolithic propose that certain figures in the visual arts, (super)human or animal, or even the anthropomorphic megaliths of Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori, depicted shamans; at the same time, the art

itself was likely produced by shamans themselves (Peters and Schmidt 2004: 212–13). Furthermore, in societies without writing, the visual language of signs, symbols, and formulaic figures constituted the primary system of communication regarding notions of the highest intellectual and spiritual order. Examples might include the animal figures carved severally or in small groups on the megaliths of Göbekli Tepe, which Klaus Schmidt (2006: 221–26) has considered Neolithic “hieroglyphs” (Figure 21.1), or the repertoire of signs and symbols preserved on prehistoric Samarra, Halaf, and Susiana pottery, which Petr Charvát (2005) and Margaret Cool Root (2005b), among others, have attempted to decipher. The aesthetic and semantic environments created by such artists and their art would in turn have established the settings for the shared experience of daily life and religious behavior alike.



Figure 21.1 Megalith decorated with relief sculpture showing animal figures. Göbekli Tepe, southeastern Anatolia/northern Mesopotamia (Turkey), Pre-Pottery Neolithic (ca. 10,000–9,000 BCE.)

Photograph courtesy of Mehmet-Ali Ataç.

Signs and symbols, astral or divine, persisted in Mesopotamian art in

historical periods, this time on inscribed commemorative monuments or stelae (Börker-Klähn 1982; Seidl 1989; Slanski 2003). Especially in Kassite (ca. 1595–1155 BCE) and Neo-Assyrian examples, the visual and semantic implications of the “hieroglyphic” script composed of these signs and symbols are much more enigmatic than the often rather prosaic contents of the actual texts inscribed on them in cuneiform script. Usually aligned in the upper fields of the monuments, these signs and symbols are direct analogues, if not the distant descendants, of the repertoire of signs, symbols, and figural types comprising the semiotic systems of prehistoric art. Like their ancestors, they form a mode of visual communication not yet fully deciphered.

The links that scholars have traced between signs and symbols on Susa I pottery and the later signs of the Mesopotamian gods and earliest pictographic writing system in Sumer (Charvát 2005) suggest a continuity in modes of symbolic communication across the threshold that marks state formation in the ancient Near East. Such links, along with affinities in visual imagery among the art of the Uruk (ca. 3500–3100 BCE), Jemdet Nasr (ca. 3100–2900 BCE), and Proto-Elamite (ca. 3100–2700 BCE) cultures, also speak to a deep-seated intellectual dimension to interaction between southern Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran, beyond the environmental and economic models that inform explanations for the “Uruk expansion” (Pittman 1992a, 1992b; Hansen 2003a: 26). An analogous link across the threshold of state formation has also been plausibly suggested between prehistoric shamans and later priestly scholars: the shamans of Neolithic society gradually disappeared around 3000 BCE, becoming the scholars of the historical periods characterized by the state and its intellectual bases (Wilburn 2005: 69; Schmidt 2006: 219).

Priestly activity and scholarly learning often intersected in Mesopotamia, and the learning of scholars and the sources of their scholarship must be thought of as embedded in a largely religious and ritual sphere (Sallaberger and Huber Vulliet 2005). Scholars may not have been priests in the strict sense, but they certainly were the keepers of Mesopotamia’s sacral traditions. Their presence in court culture cannot be divorced from the design and codification of visual imagery, no matter how difficult it may be to pin down this association in surviving texts. The available data concerning experts, craftsmanship, materials, and industries (Moorey 1994), although extremely important in their own right, do not necessarily illuminate matters of intellectual correspondence and overlap in identity between court scholars and iconographers.

Within a Neolithic artistic idiom, depictions of wild animals and animal-headed human beings may be connected with shamanic concepts on account of the various animal forms the shaman takes during states of trance and contact with a world beyond the senses (Eliade [1951] 1972: 156; Brentjes 1999: 71; Schmidt 2006: 125, 216–20). Among animals evoking shamanic concepts and depicted in the southeastern Anatolian Neolithic are scorpions

and snakes. The latter symbolize the endless life cycle by virtue of their reemergence from old skins; the snake was also the helper of the Siberian shamans (Schmidt 2007: 39; Özkaya and San 2007: 28–29). One of the quintessentially shamanic animals, the bird, whose form the shaman takes in his ascent to heaven for an encounter with the supreme divinity (Eliade [1951] 1972: 156–57), appears both in relief and statuary at Göbekli Tepe and Nevalı Çori. A statue from the latter site even depicts a bird in association with human heads (Brentjes 1999: 75; Hauptmann 2007: 145–46; Hauptmann and Schmidt 2007: 21–22). Capable of reaching heights impossible within human limits, birds must have been considered manifestations of superior forces in prehistoric human consciousness and imagination (Schmidt 2006: 78).

Thousands of years later, winged and bird-headed human figures appear in Assyrian art of the second and first millennia BCE. They may have preserved the same trope of combining an animal capable of flying and the human body in visualizing superhuman beings with special magical and craftsmanship skills. In the Neo-Assyrian case, they were the *apkallus*, or antediluvian sages, of ancient tradition. As mythical ancestors of the Assyrian court scholars, the presence of these figures especially in the art of the early Neo-Assyrian Empire speaks to a connection between expert scholars (*ummânu*) and court iconographers (Parpola 1993: xiii–xxvii; Ataç 2010a), paralleling the affinity or identity between shamans and the creators of Neolithic art.

In one wall painting from Çatalhöyük are prominent and highly stylized vultures with human legs accompanying headless human bodies, also rendered in stylized fashion (Hodder 2006b: 137–38). Rather than simply indicating death and decay, the vulture may be meaningful here within a conceptual system concerned with life, death, and the state or transformation of the human being after death—concepts likely of central importance to Neolithic communities. Ian Hodder (2006b: 196) has suggested that painted scenes from Çatalhöyük featuring vultures with human legs may depict “ritual leaders” who “‘became’ vultures as they flew (interceded) between the intermediate level and the upper, sky level of spirits” in a putative three-tier cosmos associated with shamanic worldviews. Also compelling is the view of David Lewis-Williams (2004: 42), who sees in the scenes a reference to the altered states of shamanic experience characterized by “reduction to a skeleton and dismemberment,” expressed here by acts that would be performed by vultures on a dead human body. In this regard, the therianthropic vultures and the headless human beings would have been a way for Çatalhöyük religious specialists to convey “the interface between themselves and a spirit realm” (Lewis-Williams 2004: 42). The visual manifestations of multiple deities and divine beings as animal-headed in both ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the highly emblematic protective and numinous capacity of birds such as vultures and eagles in their visual arts, may again betray a shamanic substratum that became fully integrated into

state ideologies governed by rulers and scholars across the ages and expressed most directly in art (Brentjes 1999).

In examining the art of the ancient Near East from new perspectives and reconstructing its intellectual environments, we need to take seriously elements of continuity in tropes and approaches to visual signification over long periods. Yet we also need to acknowledge the presence of a language in art sometimes distinct from the textual record, which we may designate as a supra-textual visual language with its own autonomy and sources, often oral and performative. In the prehistoric Near East this language was the sole system of learned communication within artistic environments. That it was joined later by the textual medium—in whose formation the visual originally had the greatest impact—should not detract from the continuing role of images as the medium in which only certain kinds of ideas were expressed.

Often, certain aspects of the knowledge borne by images were not meant to be written down. Many features of visual imagery that we cannot now explain and continue to debate likely represent elements of that autonomous visual language whose lineage reaches back to prehistoric cultures (Wengrow 2003), while its core and heritage permeate and inform the art of the great empires of the second and first millennia BCE. Such an observation has a direct bearing on any effort to reconstruct artistic environments. This endeavor cannot be divorced from that of understanding the visual arts in their proper context, which is not always appropriately construed as historical, archaeological, and socio-political.

Artistic Environments of the Early State

In cultures of the ancient Near East characterized by centralized administration and political rule, we observe the development of imagery in the service of rule and the ruler, with special focus on the ruler figure and his representative, often formulaic, activities, such as the hunt. In Mesopotamia this imagery first appears in the Uruk period, the era of state formation and the earliest writing. In prehistoric eras, the leading members of the society, the putative shamanic personages, may have been shown as superhuman, such as the animal-headed figures of the Susa I culture with exaggerated bodily proportions and musculature (Strommenger 1962: pl. 9; Aruz 1992: 43–45). By contrast, the figural type identified as the ruler of Uruk, the **en**, appears in full-fledged anthropomorphic form with realistic human dress and anatomy (Strommenger 1962: pls. 32–33; Wilburn 2005: 65).

Yet in the roughly contemporary cultures of southeastern Anatolia and the Susiana plain, notions of individuals with superhuman potency continued to find direct expression in the visual arts, more consistent with prehistoric

idioms. In late Chalcolithic Arslantepe (VI A, ca. 3300–3000 BCE), characterized by a unique and local manifestation of an administrative system partly inspired by Uruk, are depictions of a human being rendered with a fantastic visage (Frangipane 1997). He appears in the wall paintings from the palatial or administrative building, with attributes that identify him as a figure of authority: he sits under a canopy and holds a staff-like object. This figure is clearly not a straightforward political leader; he is shown in a manner in which his numinous persona shines through the highly stylized representation. Here, within an early administrative system, is an artistic environment that gives precedence to the spiritual world in expressing possible notions of governance. In this respect, the putative Arslantepe ruler is analogous to the shamanic figures depicted on Chalcolithic Susa pottery.

In the Susiana culture of southwestern Iran, the Proto-Elamite figural types of bull- and lion-headed demons, with exaggerated but almost human musculature, connote superhuman capabilities (Pittman 1992b: 69, 75–76). They appear both in sculptures and in cylinder seal impressions on administrative tablets. Henri Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 33) and Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1993: 212) observed similarities between a stone statuette of a humanoid lioness and the art of Uruk. Schmandt-Besserat likened the clenched fists of the Proto-Elamite lioness to those of the well-known statuette of the **en** from the Eanna complex at Uruk. Frankfort noted the two curvilinear elements in the lioness’s dorsal anatomy and compared them with the pictograph for the goddess Inanna, which derives from the image of a doorpost fashioned from a bundle of reeds.

The lion is the symbolic animal of Inanna and her Semitic manifestation, Ishtar. Frankfort’s and Schmandt-Besserat’s observations helpfully emphasize the affinity between the art of Uruk, albeit fully naturalistic in its main elements, and that of contemporary southwestern Iran, where the visual arts much more explicitly preserve supernatural elements. The supernatural element may simply lie suppressed or encrypted in—but is emphatically not absent from—the art of Uruk, whose system of governance fully integrated the religious with the political: the **en** of Uruk was a “priest-king” (Schmandt-Besserat 1993; Steinkeller 1999), and at least according to one perspective, the relevant figural type may connote a divine force complementing Inanna (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 186–96).

Indeed, the Proto-Elamite lioness may represent the superhuman background to the idea of a leader or ruler, again in almost shamanic terms, while simultaneously reflecting an artistic environment created by shamanic personages. The special affinity of the Uruk priest-king with wild animals, especially lions, appears again on the so-called Uruk (Warka) or Lion Hunt Stele, which shows the **en** hunting lions (see Figure 12.1 in Pongratz-Leisten, this volume). Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 30) saw the lion as the destructive aspect of the goddess who also gives life and enables regeneration: concepts

that likely also permeate aspects of artistic symbolism in the Neolithic Near East (Eisler 1987).

Thus, the theme of the royal hunt, which first appears in the Uruk period, may archaistically engage with the venerable symbolism of wild animals as vehicles of contact with the spirit world, as in Neolithic art. Its subsequent revival in the Neo-Assyrian period, especially in the palace reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) and Assurbanipal, reflects this primordial meaning along with that of royal prowess. It is in the Early Dynastic period, however, that art once again expresses the supernatural through animal-headed human or full-fledged animal figures, standing upright and acting like humans. The hero figure that appears among them in seal impressions is identical to the figure depicted on sculptured vessels from the Jemdet Nasr period (Strommenger 1962: pls. 24–25); we may think of him as the direct descendant of the prehistoric shamanic figures. In a period when texts were available but highly restricted in their content, the mythological world displayed in the visual arts had its own autonomous sources to which the artist surely had access.

The Early Dynastic III (ca. 2500 BCE) royal tombs of Ur provide another good case study. Here artistic production mainly served a priestly institution whose primary medium of expression was musical performance (Cohen 2005). Beyond reconstructing the ritual events connected with the burials and identifying the deceased, recent scholarship has considered the tombs and their imagery within Mesopotamian intellectual history (Cohen 2005; Gansell 2007). The imagery associated with the tomb finds, emphasizing floral and wild animal motifs (lion, bull, stag, wild goat), places the viewer within an enduring world of signs, symbols, and visual language. The bull-harp found in the so-called King's Tomb is emblematic of the larger visual and song culture the tombs embed (Woolley 1934: 62–71). Its front panel depicts in shell inlay a world largely unfamiliar within local cultural parameters (Figure 21.2). Beyond the hero figure “master of animals” and the scorpion creature, a mythological aspect attested in later Mesopotamian texts, the intermediate registers showing animals playing music and bringing food to a banquet are rare in Mesopotamia and have always baffled scholars (Frankfort [1954] 1996: 75–77). One explanation sees influence here from the art of southwestern Iran, more inclined to show animals acting like humans (Hansen 2003a: 34; 2003b: 106–7).



Figure 21.2 Inlaid front panel of “Bull-Harp.” Ur, Royal Cemetery, PG 789 (“King’s Tomb”); Early Dynastic IIIA (ca. 2500 BCE). Shell and bitumen; 31.5 cm. University of Pennsylvania Museum B17694A.

We observed earlier the deep-seated connections between the art of Uruk and the Proto-Elamite culture. Rather than explaining these unusual depictions as evidence for outside influence, we might interpret them as pristine aspects of an artistic environment fully at home both in Elam and in southern Mesopotamia in the early third millennium. A single set of images as they may be, showing a world beyond the senses, presumably the netherworld, the bull-harp panels indicate the survival of shamanic notions of experiencing the beyond on the part of special human beings, whose experience would then have been paramount in codifying and producing/executing the visual arts. The animal figures that behave like humans would thus refer to those very individuals. With its emphasis on death and what lies beyond, the ritual environment of the Ur tombs reflects the mindset that gave visual expression to these conceptions.

Early Dynastic temples in the Diyala Valley have yielded chlorite vessels carved in an “intercultural style,” again with Iranian and possibly Harappan connections, whose imagery diverges from typical Mesopotamian figural types (Aruz 2003a: 244–45; 2003b: 330–32). One example shows a “hero” figure holding snakes, whose counterpart appears on the vessel’s opposite face, this time holding streams of water (Strommenger 1962: pl. 38). The latter figure is flanked by humped zebu, an animal at home in India rather than Mesopotamia (Frankfort [1954] 1996: 40–41). A figure with a wild goat’s head who holds streams or snakes appears in Susa I sealings (Aruz 1992: 45–46), and the shamanic associations of this image may extend to the comparable hero figure on the chlorite vessel, who also seems to command the animal and natural world. In both instances, the affinity of the streams to those of the Mesopotamian flowing vase speaks to the subtle but integral artistic bonds between prehistory and early state society, on the one hand, and between southern Mesopotamia and Iran, on the other.

Beyond matters of historical record, the act of commemoration, and royal victory, a preoccupation with death and its implications is evident in the imagery of the Early Dynastic III Stele of the Vultures (see Figure 11.3 in Collins, this volume) (Winter 1985). We have seen the trope of the vulture in association with headless human bodies on a painting in Çatalhöyük. The motif of vultures preying on decapitated enemy heads on the reverse of the stele, and the emphasis on the head of the leading enemy struck by the god’s mace on the obverse, may be connected semantically. Neither vultures nor head-smiting are mentioned in the stele’s text, which describes the victory of Eannatum, ruler of Lagash, in the border conflict between the city-states of Umma and Lagash (Cooper 1983: 45–48). We are thus again in the autonomous realm of visual imagery, which may refer to death and dismemberment in their age-old, if not prehistoric, associations of altered states rather than merely in the service of a political agenda. The presence of

such layers of meaning in the stele, albeit not entirely clear to us in all its elements, shows the artist as operating both within and beyond a domain of official service to the king and the god Ningirsu.

Scholars have already observed in the art of the ancient Near East the complexity of the rhetoric of violence, dismemberment, and death, proposing to see these themes beyond a realistic representation of what happened, and royal or imperial propaganda (Richardson 2007; Bahrani 2008). The emphasis in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs on decapitated heads, especially that of the Elamite king Teumman, and the appearance of birds of prey and eagles especially in the battle scenes of Assurnasirpal II, Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE), and Assurbanipal, document the complex interplay between the historical tradition and the much older, autonomous visual language. We encounter this interplay in Mesopotamia for the first time in the Stele of the Vultures; its most expansive and complex examples appear in the Neo-Assyrian period (Moortgat 1949: 126–42).

The Territorial State

The lion-headed eagle, often considered to represent the mythological figure Imdugud or Anzu, is the emblem of a fundamental numinous force connected with the notion of the mountain land (Sumerian **kur**), the mythical setting for the heroic exploits of the gods Ningirsu and Ninurta (van Dijk 1983). Present on the Stele of the Vultures as the emblematic bird of Ningirsu, Imdugud/Anzu also appears in sculptural form at the Early Dynastic Temple of Ninhursag at Tell al-Ubaid, holding under its talons two symmetrically positioned stags in a hammered copper composition of figures of wild animals (Winter 1985: 14–15). The goddess Ninhursag, mother of Ningirsu, is another divinity connected with mountains in this numinous sense. She appears on an Early Dynastic votive plaque featuring an early elaborate version of the so-called “mountain scale pattern” (Moortgat 1969: pl. 114), which Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 22, 112) identified as the representation par excellence of the religious environment in Mesopotamian art. The scalloped pattern characterizing this image resembles the proto-cuneiform pictograph for what became the Sumerian word **kur** (mountain, mountain land, or netherworld): a roughly triangular mound rendered in the same manner.

Especially in the third and second millennia, the “mountain scale pattern” is not mountainous terrain in the ordinary sense, but a religious or numinous landscape connected with the idea of a realm beyond ordinary perception, the domain of divine epiphany. We can understand the sacred environment denoted by the lion-headed eagle, the mountain, wild animals, and the

relevant gods especially in Early Dynastic art as the codification by master iconographers of a deeper substratum of experiences of the numinous, or the beyond. The master artists who developed and transmitted this set of imagery may themselves have been well versed in experiences, visions, or religious states that informed this visual codification. Perhaps they worked with specialists possessing access to ecstatic or altered states, or they themselves had such access. Thus, the relevant imagery was a highly stylized translation into the visual medium of experiential phenomena or religious states in tandem with myths revolving around journeys to the mountain land, an embodiment of the netherworld or the beyond in ancient Mesopotamian mytho-poetic consciousness.

The experience of a mountainous area also underlies the Stele of Naram-Sin (see [Figure 14.4](#) in Downes, this volume), the most emblematic monument surviving from the Akkadian state (ca. 2334–2154 BCE). While on one level it is a victory monument commemorating Naram-Sin's defeat of a mountain tribe, the paradigm here clearly also concerns a special human being's experience of the numinous. Even though the mountain-scale pattern does not appear, the prominent and steep mound toward which the king is oriented and the solar symbols in the upper field signal the setting's supernatural quality. The royal figure's pronounced musculature and his horned helmet express the special or superhuman (Winter 1996), even shamanic, nature of the human being who has the experience. A figure in a position of leadership in his community is rendered with special attributes, some of which are animal—a trope with prehistoric roots. Most interpretations of the stele emphasize that it shows the deified king of Mesopotamia's first territorial state in a military victory sanctioned by the gods. We could instead highlight an artistic environment defined by the unique qualities of specialists or experts in matters concerning the numinous and its experience, here expressed in association with the ruler. Beyond “royal ideology,” in other words, the ruler figure emerges as the proxy for those individuals with special powers and experiences, who in turn may have been precisely those closely involved in artistic production—not necessarily at the level of craftsmanship or execution, but of conception and creation.

The Imperial State

The emblematic lion-headed bird disappears from the artistic record after the Early Dynastic period, but its repercussions are evident in the art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its predecessors in northern Mesopotamia in the second half of the second millennium. Frankfort ([1954] 1996: 134–35) proposed that both the Mesopotamian lion-headed eagle and the Egyptian Horus falcon played a role in the formation of the Assyrian winged disk. Adopted from

Egypt in the Middle Bronze Age, the winged disk is a hallmark of the “international” art of the imperial states of Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia in the Late Bronze Age and later. As a manifestation of ultimate divinity or the head of a pantheon, often connected with notions of universal rule characterizing imperial regimes (Ornan 2005; Pongratz-Leisten 2011), in Mittanian glyptic the winged disk frequently appears hovering above a vertical element or stylized tree (Moortgat 1949: 100–5; 1969: 109–12).

Diana Stein (2006, 2009) has explained the designs in Mittanian glyptic, especially the unique composition on the royal seal of Saushtatar (Figure 21.3), as visual expressions of ecstatic visions, altered states, and matters of spiritual enlightenment belonging to the religious practices of highland communities in the Zagros foothills of northern Mesopotamia, translated into the state iconography of the Mittani kingdom. In turn, these practices had tremendous impact on the iconographic codification of Neo-Assyrian imperial art. If the glyptic imagery translates mental images associated with religious experience into a stylized visual form, its creators cannot be dissociated from those who had that experience. Although Stein does not explicitly invoke shamanic notions, her delineation of the highland hunter’s ritual world resonates simultaneously with prehistoric semiotic systems and their shamanic background. The seal of Saushtatar displays almost a revival of prehistoric imagery (Stein 2006). Here are not only wild animals held in check by superhuman figures, but also a prominent personage wearing a tail and bird’s wings. He is the descendant of the shamanic figures of prehistoric Susa I glyptic and pottery and the ancestor of the winged bird-headed genii of Middle and Neo-Assyrian art.

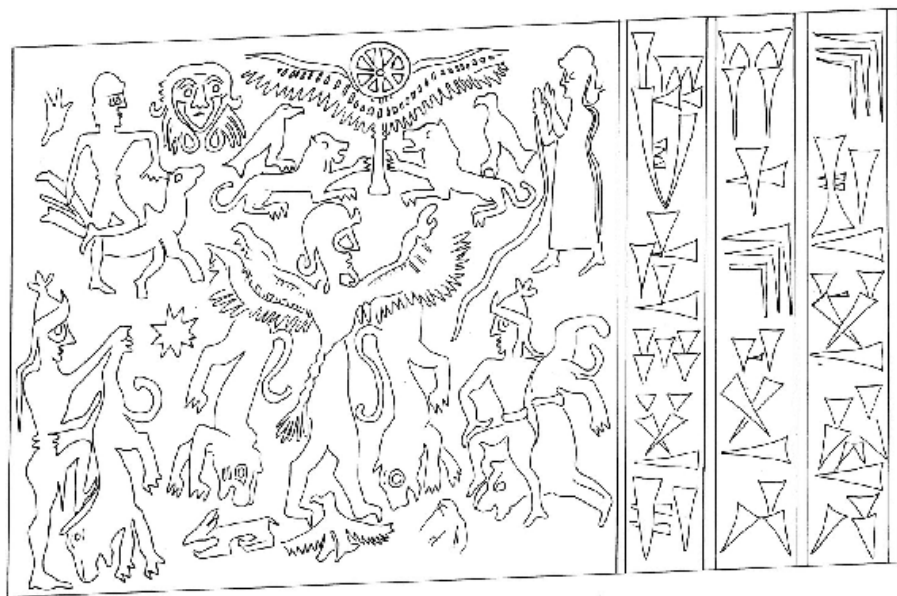


Figure 21.3 Drawing of the impression on a tablet (SMN 1000) from Nuzi of

cylinder seal of Saushtatar. Nuzi; Mittani era (ca. 1500–1350 BCE).

From Edith Porada, “Remarks on Mitannian (Hurrian) and Middle Assyrian Glyptic Art,” *Akkadica* 13 (1979), fig. 2. Reproduced with permission.

The winged disk surmounting a pole in the seal’s upper field suggests a synoptic emblem of the process of ascent to heaven, enabled by a terrestrial vertical element that leads at its apex to access to a supreme celestial divinity, solar or astral. As such, conceptions of shamanic ascent may well have been fully syncretized with and assimilated by mythological systems and court imageries of the Late Bronze Age empires. Additional examples include the Egyptian *djed* pillar, with its horizontal steps, surmounted by the solar disk, standing for Osiris and the sun god, respectively; and the Neo-Assyrian “sacred tree,” with its multiple tiers, surmounted by the winged solar disk. The rich repertoire of both familiar and unfamiliar figural types—human, animal, and mythical—found in Middle Assyrian glyptic, and the original ways in which they are combined, stand midway between ecstatic visions and a stable mythology/state ideology.

Conclusion

Through selected case studies of artistic environments, I have suggested that a history of the art of the ancient Near East still waits to be (re)written, and that an alternative history based on artistic sources is also outstanding. Unexplored semantic domains exist beyond texts concerning craftsmen, materials, industries, and royal correspondence. Unexplored domains also exist beyond the traditional assumptions about the role of the visual arts in expressing royal ideology, legitimacy, and the apotropaic and auspicious notions of the agrarian state. The artists and artistic environments of the ancient Near East are hidden in those vast domains.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

The essays in Gunter [1990b](#) constitute an excellent introduction to the question of “artistic environments.” Root [1979](#) (esp. 1–42) analyzes the creative process in artistic production dealing both with supervisors and craftsmen and the king himself. Parpola [1993](#) and Winter [1997](#) examine correspondence between artists and kings in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Winter [2008](#) offers perspectives on craftsmanship as special knowledge in the Neo-Assyrian written record. Investigations of “artistic environments” of the Neolithic period include Root [2005c](#), Charvát [2005](#), and Hodder [2006b](#). Ataç [2010a](#) discusses the intersection between artists and scholars based on a

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PART IV

INTERACTIONS WITH NEIGHBORING REGIONS AND ARTISTIC TRADITIONS

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Ancient Near East and Egypt

Betsy M. Bryan

Introduction

Egypt displayed material connections to the Near East even in the early Holocene era (ca. 9,500–7,500 BCE), as links between the Natufian culture of the Levant and the Nile Delta attest (Debono and Mortensen [1990](#); Hassan [2000](#)). The drier environments of the fifth and fourth millennia document trade and exchange with both Upper and Lower Egyptian Neolithic cultures, as lapis lazuli, cylinder seals, and ceramics at sites such as Hierakonpolis, Maadi, and Tell el-Farkha demonstrate. Indeed, the presence of cross influences in artistic motifs between Egypt, the Levant, southern Mesopotamia, and Elam is just as extensive in the late fourth millennium as in the second millennium and later.

In all periods there is difficulty in isolating original sources. This complex environment of exchange characterizes the nearly three thousand years of history reviewed here through selected case studies.

Image Exchange in the Fourth Millennium: Service to Technology and State Formation

As many have argued, the primary means of artistic transfer must have been the trade route environment that conveyed seal technology and, more significantly here, iconography (Moorey [1987](#); Aruz [2013](#)). Egypt's adoption of elements from the Near East in the late fourth millennium has frequently been recognized, but these icons were seldom retained. The “ruler” figure on the Gebel el-Arak knife who wears Mesopotamian-style garb was apparently a unique instance, for example, and the serpent-necked felines disappeared from Egyptian elite iconography after early Dynasty 1 (Boehmer [1991](#); Pittman [1996](#)). Nonetheless, the circulation of Near Eastern imagery during the later fourth millennium, including composite and fantastic figures such as griffins, sphinxes, and serpopards, has sustained scholarly attention because of associations with emerging technologies and states. During all ancient eras, griffins and sphinxes appeared throughout the Near East and the Aegean, and exhibited wide flexibility in types and styles. Both successfully remained

within the corpus of divine imagery in Egypt, but the griffin displayed two basic head shapes over time. A non-crested bird-headed form with talons and splayed wings originated in Elam (Susa II), and carved Egyptian examples on a cosmetic palette, the Gebel el-Tarif knife handle, a dagger from Abydos, and a Hierakonpolis ivory element—all dating to Naqada III—closely resemble this type. A second crested form from Susa appears also to have influenced Egyptian depictions on ivories from Hierakonpolis and Tell el-Farkha (Teissier 1987: 31–32; Ciałowicz 2011a: 21).

Nicholas Wyatt (2009: 30) suggested that an Egyptian griffin with non-crested bird head and feline body may have developed independently, but his argument depends more on the image's symbolism than on its iconography. The later Egyptian griffin has a falcon head and leonine body, and conveys the religious symbolism of the royal falcon god Horus. This form also conveyed the griffin's solar significance as an agent of the sun god, analogous to the vengeful role of Sakhmet and other leonine deities (Eggebrecht 1977; Kamrin 1999: 86–87). Yet composite forms, including non-crested bird heads, were an early artistic form in Egypt, as the male and female bird-headed figures from the Naqada I–II period illustrate. Thus Egypt's adoption of Susa-like griffins may reflect their compatibility with preexisting imagery (Graff 2008; Hendrickx 2011: 78–80).

A wingless crested female ivory griffin clutching a wine jar was discovered in Tell el-Farkha's Dynasty 0/1 votive caches (ca. 3200–3000 BCE) (Ciałowicz 2011a; 2011b: 60, fig. 6.9). The contents of those caches were analogous to ceramic models known from the southern Naqada culture, e.g., a bird-headed beer-brewer figure (Graff 2008). At Tell el-Farkha, however, new types such as this griffin and several “uraei” cobras appear, underlining royal and solar imagery for both icons already in Dynasty 1 (Ciałowicz 2011a, 2011b; Bussmann 2011). Tell el-Farkha's location in the eastern Delta made it a natural trade center, and, fueled by Naqada expansionist interest in luxury import materials, styles, and objects, the ivory griffin's form may represent a blended expression of Naqada models and Near Eastern griffin imagery (Bussmann 2011: 755–57). Yet the persistence of Egyptian griffin imagery must lie in its compatibility with specific divine symbolism.

David Wengrow (2014) has recently discussed the significance of these “monsters”—griffins, serpopards, and pseudo-human figures such as Bes and Huwawa. Although poorly attested in earlier eras, near the end of the fourth millennium griffins, sphinxes, fantastic felines, and the like traveled from east to west through the technology of seals and trade routes. Wengrow sees the creation and replication of several monstrous forms as the product of a transformative moment: the period of state formation. Elite construction of imagery that materialized supernatural notions on behalf of the emerging state also acted to circulate such monsters within a known, trade-bound world. Likewise, the third-millennium movement of such monstrous figures as

Taweret from Egypt to Nubia, the Levant, and the Aegean took place in similarly transformational settings, as Egypt involved itself in the greater world. Further examples might include Bes, whose extensive dissemination throughout the Mediterranean world in the second and first millennia was likewise associated with performance, fertility, and libation rituals (Teissier 1996: 78; Kaiser 2003; Nagy 2007).

Despite these creatures' supernatural nature, they were not restricted to specific sacred landscapes, which also fueled their movement (Eliade 1959). Wengrow understands them as providers of protection, an aspect that allowed them to be adopted in a variety of settings. Griffins became solar emblems in Egypt and royal hunters in the Aegean; in the Mediterranean Taweret was adopted as a female ritualist but in Syria and Nubia wielded a knife to protect the home (Aruz 2008c: 137). Hathor's bovine symbol traveled into the Levant, but her anthropoid form with cow-headed crown was equally common on Middle Bronze Syrian seals (Eder 1995: 97–107, 154–58; Teissier 1996: 83, nos. 148–51, 183–85). Although Hathor had numerous specific cult places outside Egypt—Byblos, Sinai, Qatna—the multivalence of the goddess as an agent and protectress of the sun god encouraged her dissemination. As Wengrow implied, protection was certainly prominent among the iconographical symbols that moved rapidly and often throughout the entire region. Ankh signs, wedjat eyes, and Egyptian royal regalia were among the elements most commonly exported into Syrian and Palestinian seals in the Middle Bronze Age, for example (Eder 1995: 146–58; Teissier 1996: 88–90).

Artistic Exchange in the Third and Second Millennia: Ideology Exported, Technique and Form Imported

The active early third-millennium trade between the southern Levant and Egypt cannot be confirmed later in the Old Kingdom. Perhaps Canaanite elites reused the palettes and vessels of Dynasties 1 and 2 as heirloom Egyptian objects. Stone bowls of cultic type, such as at Tell Yarmuth and Bab ed-Dhra, may suggest Egyptian gifts to the local ruler (Sowada 2009: ch. 4). Yet Egypt exploited turquoise in the Sinai, and from Dynasties 3 to 6 regularly used the Horus Ways road.

Egyptian objects found throughout the Near East, although often preserved in later contexts, well attest involvement in cultural and artistic exchange during the Old Kingdom (Diego Espinel 2002; Scandone Matthiae 2003). Stone vessels, in particular, occur in large numbers at Byblos; some name Old

Kingdom rulers, although most were found in later levels. Karin Sowada (2009: 18–22, 128–39) has discussed the problematic and later contexts of Egyptian objects found in Byblos and the difficulties of identifying imports: materials, quality of work, definition of style, and means of transmission are all subject to interpretive error. Findspots of Egyptian inscribed stone objects in the northern Levant include more inland sites, such as Ebla, Hama, and Hazor, but only Ebla yielded a large number of originally Old Kingdom-contexted finds. Anatolia has not yet produced objects with secure context, while the many stone objects from Crete include only a few fragments from environments contemporary with the Old Kingdom.

Egypt's deepest and most persistent nodes of contact in the northern Levant were apparently Byblos and Ebla. Commodity exchange with Byblos probably focused on wood, as reflected in materials found in Old Kingdom tombs and represented on Sahure's Abusir causeway reliefs (Sowada 2009: 56–73; El Awady 2009). Egypt's impressive seagoing capabilities have been further confirmed by the Red Sea port at Gawasis, where regular expeditions to and from Punt were serviced and ships were assembled for the journeys (Marcus 2007). Thus cedar may have been brought not only from Byblos, but also from Turkey's Cilician coast (Ward 2013: 47). Textual and archaeological records confirm Egyptian imports of cedar from the northern Levant, but do not document commodities exchanged through Ebla.

Since Ebla was a great textile center, Egypt may have sought various types of woven materials, but Old Kingdom records do not confirm it; nor is there a name for Ebla in Egyptian sources—and vice versa (Biga and Roccati 2012). Ebla was apparently also a major entrepôt for lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, and perhaps Egypt traded its gold: either directly, or indirectly through Byblos and its rulers (Biga 2010). Dugurasu, a toponym from the Ebla archives, has recently been identified as a Delta river port, perhaps Ro-Hat (literally, “front door”) (Biga and Roccati 2012). Yet the quantities of lapis lazuli brought to Egypt would hardly have required whole shiploads, and envoys could have carried out the formal exchanges implied by the numerous inscribed Egyptian objects from the Ebla palace.¹ In summary, throughout the Old Kingdom Egypt desired and acquired cedar and lapis as primary commodities from the northern Levant. Yet no specific artistic elements from those regions are readily identifiable within Egypt. The raw materials apparently sufficed as exotic markers.

The Middle Kingdom and Middle Bronze Cultures

Anatolian and Syro-Cappadocian glyptic from the late third and early second millennium displays little or no Egyptianization; human-headed sphinxes appear in seal impressions on Kültepe tablets but may have arrived via

Mesopotamia. Yet immediately thereafter in Anatolia and Syria the numbers and types of Egyptianizing iconography virtually exploded, evidenced by figures wearing Hathoric-type curls, lion-styled ivories, and even a Bes plaque (Teissier 1996: 12–14; 80–81, no. 139; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 87; Aruz 2008b). Pharaonic-type figures wearing the Atef crown also appear in glyptic, and slightly later in Ebla’s royal iconography (Teissier 1996: 114, no. 241; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 9).

Referring to the central Anatolian ivories attributed to Acemhöyük (ca. 1900–1750 BCE), Joan Aruz (2008b: 82) remarked that they “represent an early instance of the melding of traditions,” which also formed the foundations for Hittite art. Her observation surely also characterizes the rapidly developing mixed styles that emerged in Syrian and Anatolian glyptic in the early second millennium. Beatrice Teissier (1996: 14–25) has identified glyptic workshops that employ Egyptianizing features consistent with existing styles—for example, animal or solar emblems that meld with local animal and natural forms. Egyptian themes appeared first in popular forms and later on royal seals. Ankh signs, hovering vultures, and goddesses wearing the horns and sun disk of Hathor occur on royal seals found in Kültepe and in palace contexts in Alalakh level VII, reinforcing the notion that Egyptian elements signified status for local rulers, including the positive (political?) aspects of friendly relationships (Eder 1995: 197–208).²

In some cases, images of Egyptian kings on seals—in connection with Egyptian deities, local deities, or local rulers—may imply a strong and protective royal influence; strikingly, some Byblite rulers bear the “mayoral” title of ḥry-*c* (Eder 1995: 54; Teissier 1996: 2, 13). Egypt may have been a source of military support for Byblos in disruptions with Ullaza in the late Middle Kingdom (Quack 1992; Schneider 2002). The Annals of Amenemhet II perhaps allude to this support in an expedition against *’Isy*, possibly Ura, which some locate in northern Syria (Marcus 2007: 173); others reassert an older view that identified it with Cyprus (Quack 1996). On the other hand, the materials from *’Isy* listed in the Annals were typical of metal tools and objects used in mining expeditions, rather than the large amounts of copper or northern Levantine goods mentioned elsewhere.³ Whether Egypt defended Byblos militarily as early as the reign of Amenemhet II is uncertain, but the seals’ use of Egyptianizing symbols to connote the Egyptian ruler’s friendly protection does suggest a positive and influential presence in Lebanon and Syria during Middle Bronze II.

Amenemhet’s reign may have been crucial for Egypt’s renewed involvement with the Levant, arguably maritime-based and more extensive than previously (Marcus (2007: 170–73). The Annals’ toponyms and expedition information indicate a form of port-to-port shipping that called at cities from Ashkelon to Dor, perhaps originating in Tell el-Dab’a and ending at Byblos and environs. Byblos and Qatna have yielded royal statuary of earlier Dynasty 12, but

whether it arrived through trade or gift exchange is unknown. Other archaeological evidence supports a commercial relationship particularly stemming from the type of maritime shipping described above. In Egypt itself, for the first time, an interest in displaying interaction with the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean emerged (Altenmüller and Moussa 1991; Doumet-Serhal 2013).

The Tod Treasure was found in four copper alloy boxes inscribed with the cartouches of Amenemhet II (Figure 22.1). Deposited beneath the floor of the Tod Temple as a votive offering to the god Montu, probably by this ruler, the treasure has been known since 1936. The numerous silver vessels, flattened and folded to fit the chests, are not Egyptian in origin; their curved, swirling, and fluted sides have been compared with Aegean (primarily Minoan), Anatolian, and north Syrian forms (Fitton 2009a, with bibliography). Technical analysis suggests several original sources (Fitton 2009b: 64–65). Given the vessels' thinness and perfunctory workmanship, Genevieve Pierrat-Bonnefois (2008: 66) concluded that the silver served as material rather than object, the vessels comprising a form of ingot. Mari letters of similar date appear to allude to silver vessels as a medium of exchange, she noted, their form and decoration identifying the place of manufacture. Yet the strong stylistic connections linking the Tod Treasure silver vessels with Aegean ceramic forms and the Anatolian settlement at Kültepe return the discussion to Egypt's involvement with both regions, as reflected in the Anatolian ivories. Along with 153 silver vessels were a few silver and gold objects, a group of Mesopotamian and Anatolian lapis lazuli seals, and some raw stones and beads (Quenet et al. 2013). Aegean objects, such as a steatite plaque and a silver pendant depicting spiders and a bee, represent finished pieces apparently included equally for figural form as for materials (Aruz 2013). Because of their small size, the cylinder seals may have been appreciated instead as raw stone. But from the Egyptian perspective their sealing function may have identified their source—a perspective that could embrace all the incised stone objects, thereby increasing their symbolic value. Nevertheless, nothing in the treasure (or the Annals) identifies the contents as gifts from foreign rulers, booty, or even trade items. The varied sources point instead to acquisition through the manner of maritime exchange outlined above, and must have been felt appropriately to represent the world that Montu had opened to Egypt (Pierrat-Bonnefois 2008, with further references).



Figure 22.1 Bowls, cups, and jewelry from the Tod Treasure. Tod, Montu Temple; Dynasty 12, reign of Amenemhet II (ca. 1919–1885 BCE). Silver; h. 3.3–9.3 cm; dia. 7.7–15 cm. Musée du Louvre E15128–15318.

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Elite objects from other Middle Kingdom contexts document import of both artistic forms and techniques. The best known example is the necklace associated with Princess Khnumet’s burial at Dahshur, dated to later Dynasty 12. Christine Lilyquist (1993: 36–37) has identified the type of granulation on the Khnumet pendants as north Syrian in source but partly Cretan in inspiration, while Yvonne Markowitz and Peter Lacovara (2009) believe that foreign artisans produced the jewelry in Egypt. All acknowledge affinities between the bird pendants from the Khnumet find and the hanging “owl” pendants in the Aigina Treasure, and Egyptian cultural appreciation for Aegean forms. The Tell el-Dab’a gold pendant showing two confronting dogs standing on horizontal bars with incurving ends likewise represents a stylistic cross-over with the Aigina Treasure (Schiestl 2009). Dynasty 12 royal pectorals depict the king in mirror images, trampling as a falcon-headed griffin or smiting in anthropomorphic form (Benzel 2008). Replacing the Egyptian ruler with dogs represents a substantive semantic change, and a comparison with the “master of animals” pendants from the Aigina Treasure suggests strong interactions. Although some scholars recognize a southern Levantine source for the Tell el-Dab’a piece, recent opinion revives attribution to Aegean and Anatolian influences (Aruz 1995; Benzel 2008; Schiestl 2009). Clearly, Egypt’s commercial involvement in the eastern Mediterranean was strong at least from early Dynasty 12, as was interest in artistic forms and technical innovation from the Near East via the Levant (Lilyquist 1993). Likewise, Egyptian objects found in coastal Lebanon and Syria, and inland at major palace centers, affirm Egypt’s interest in the Levant as a commercial partner. Egyptianized seals and scarabs best document exchange with the southern Levant (Eder 1995; Teissier 1996: 15–22; Ben-Tor 2004).

The Late Bronze Age and the Egyptian New Kingdom

Egypt's cosmopolitan New Kingdom saw a newly reconstituted state commit to its role in the greater world, both south and north. Although initially artistic exchanges were both reactive and receptive to foreign influence, as Dynasty 18's rulers succeeded in eastern arenas Egyptian artisans became proactive and adaptive. Egypt's "ownership" of art forms, regardless of their place of origin, was proclaimed in two- and three-dimensional art, jewelry, and eventually architecture. The "foreignness" still apparent in Near Eastern-influenced Hyksos objects, such as the diadem of a princess decorated with a stag protome and gazelle heads interspersed with eight-pointed stars, was subsumed into more traditional Egyptian forms and either fused into Egyptian iconography or treated as an emblem of northern cultures now associated with Egypt (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 64). The animals are motifs more common in Anatolian and Syrian imagery than in Egypt during the Early and Middle Bronze Ages (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: nos. 106–7). The eight-pointed stars, which also appear in jewelry from Tell el-‘Ajjul in the southern Levant, are considered symbolic of Astarte and Ishtar. The relative chronologies of the Ajjul hoard and the Tell el-Dab‘a diadem are uncertain. But Tell el-‘Ajjul demonstrated elite wealth in tombs of the late Middle and early Late Bronze eras, and is now a likely candidate for the Hyksos stronghold Sharuhén.⁴

Christine Lilyquist (1993: 32, 55–57) discerned close connections between the Hyksos-era diadem, the Tell el-‘Ajjul and Megiddo gold objects, and the treasure of Ahhotep, dating the ‘Ajjul hoards between 1600 and 1400 BCE. She identified the granulation and glass in the Ahhotep jewels as unquestionably Canaanite in workmanship, contemporary with the ‘Ajjul and Megiddo jewels, suggesting that they could have been acquired from ‘Ajjul or, alternatively, taken from Tell el-Dab‘a. But specialists disagree on the workmanship of the Hyksos-era goldwork from the southern Levant and Egypt, debating its artisans' artistic home (Arnold 1995: 15; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: 116).

The Ahmose Axe and Dagger

Joan Aruz and Peter Lacovara recently argued for Egyptian manufacture of the axe and dagger from the burial of Queen Ahhotep, with foreign (chiefly Aegean) influences (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: nos. 67–68; for the axe, see Figure 22.2). They considered the “niello”-like technique on the dagger's

blade, into which gold wire was set to outline animals and insects, to be a Dynasty 12 innovation, observing that in the Aegean gold cut-outs were used instead. Yet only one Middle Kingdom object combining “niello” with gold wire is known, whereas in the Levant multiple elite weapons (including the sword of Ip-shemu-abi of Byblos) exhibit the technique (Wildung 1982; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 30). Using wire instead of cut-outs may have been an Egyptian technique, but here both appear: the cut-out method on the axe blade, the wire technique on the dagger. Both methods were likely used throughout the Late Bronze Age Mediterranean, but when they were introduced is uncertain (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: nos. 148, 171).



Figure 22.2 Axe of Ahmose. Thebes, tomb of Ahhotep; Dynasty 18, sixteenth century BCE. Gold, electrum, copper alloy, semiprecious stones, wood; 47.5 × 6.7 cm. Luxor Museum JE 4673.

Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reproduced with permission of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

The axe blade’s iconography typifies the manner in which imported imagery was received and embraced in the Hyksos and early Dynasty 18 eras. On one side, the blade with niello-like black shows a gold cut-out for Ahmose’s cartouches and two registers beneath (see Figure 22.2, left-hand side). In the upper register is a classical Egyptian icon appropriate to a battle axe—the king smiting, wearing the traditional shendyt-kilt of kingship and an early form of the khepresh, or “blue” crown. In the lower register is a cut-out gold griffin of an Aegean type with comb, neck curls, and upraised wings. The two images recall Dynasty 12 pectorals that showed the king in anthropomorphic form smiting Asiatics (Amenemhet III) and in hieracocephalic griffin form likewise smiting (Senwosret III) (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: 105, fig. 34; Wyatt 2009). Yet despite the strong Aegean influences, the griffin was imported into both the Levant and Egypt in the late Middle Bronze Age palace environment. In glyptic Levantine griffins display non-Egyptian forms, with comb, horns, and upraised wings—details also present on an ivory plaque from Anatolia (Lilyquist 1993; Teissier 1996: 148–50; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 69a, b). We should therefore wonder whether the Aegean form on the axe blade alluded to Crete or instead to Ahmose as an Egyptian

solarizing griffin, styled as at contemporary and earlier palaces at Thera, Alalakh, Tel Kabri, and Miletos (Lacovara and Aruz 2008; Bietak 2013; Pfälzner 2013).⁵

On the blade's opposite side are three registers of gold cut-outs inlaid with semiprecious stones (see Figure 22.2, right-hand side). These are recognizably Egyptian motifs, with an unexpectedly serious message. Above, the kneeling deity is the "Heh" god holding in each hand the hieroglyphs for "year," the combination meaning "millions of years." In the middle, the vulture and cobra goddesses sit in baskets atop plants of the south and north and portray "Nekhet and Wadjet, mistresses of Upper and Lower Egypt." In the lowest register is a sphinx as the god Aker: specifically not royal. The brow lacks a uraeus, and the sphinx, which holds a head in its hand, has a curved divine beard. Here the blade's three registers represent the cosmic cycle of "millions of years" above, the land of Egypt on earth, and the world below, to come. The Aker god appears in a manner transitional from its early form (a piece of land with heads on either end) and its later, double sphinx form that guarded the horizon (Hornung 1975). With the introduction in the Second Intermediate Period of the Book of the Dead, Aker assisted in the solar fight against Apophis and Seth: an appropriate allusion on an axe of Ahmose.

This iconography is sophisticated and original, and must represent a highly knowledgeable Egyptian design, which precludes its manufacture in an entirely non-Egyptian setting. Tell el-Dab'a was likely a repository of traditional Egyptian religious knowledge, as indicated by the scribal palette of Atu given to him by Auserre Apophis (Bourriau 2000: 180–82). Atu is described as "a scribe of Re, whom Thoth himself instructed" (Helck 1983: 57). Auserre is "greater than any king who protected the lands, the limits, and everyone who beheld him, the living image of Re upon Earth" (Helck 1983: 58).⁶ The domain of this king is not the expected Nile Valley's "two lands," but the lands outside. The Ahhotep jewels' distinctively Canaanite techniques should probably be attributed to craftsmen trained in Levantine goldworking and employed inside Egypt, as seems to have been the case later in Dynasty 18 (Lilyquist and Brill 1993: 43).

The Ahmose axe was a ceremonial object that signaled a warrior. Early Hyksos burial assemblages frequently included weapons made of tin-bronze (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 66; Lacovara and Aruz 2008). Yet by the end of Dynasty 15 the daggers and axes in the burials of Tell el-Dab'a elites were ceremonial in form and made of copper, perhaps indicating a less warlike social hierarchy (Bourriau 2000: 202). Thus Ahmose's weapon does not reject the prevailing cultural norms of his Hyksos predecessors, but its iconography is strongly Egyptian. The hybrid Egypto-Levantine motifs recognized on Hyksos scarabs (Ben-Tor 2004) and on a dagger belonging to a follower of Auserre (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 65) display the tastes of a rapidly changing elite culture stretching from the Delta to Megiddo,

which coexisted in the Nile Valley with traditional Egyptian religion and iconography (Bourriau 2000: 182).

Levantine gold techniques were absent from other objects dating to Ahmose's reign, and Lilyquist (1993: 55) proposed that a pectoral in his name contained glass that was Egyptian in technique and material, sharing elements with glass from the reign of Amenhotep I (Lilyquist and Brill 1993: 23–24, fig. 23). Egyptianization of elite artistic production can be observed throughout the craft domains, from technology to iconography and style. The flying gallop is a well-known and attested motif adopted into Egyptian art either directly from the Aegean or via the Levant (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 68). The gazelle heads, as seen on the Hyksos gold diadem, were adapted for Egyptian female royal and elite headdresses (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 64). They appear, for example, on a diadem from the tomb of the foreign wives of Thutmose III and on paintings of the daughters of Menna and Païry in Theban tombs 69 and 139 (Lilyquist 2003: 154–61).

The International Context of the Late Bronze Age

Helene Kantor (1956) observed that Late Bronze Age artisans combined Mycenaean and Canaanite motifs and styles on ivories in such an identifiable manner that the same forms were still part of artistic vocabularies several centuries later. She distinguished northern Levantine styles that fused Syrian and Aegean art, and southern Canaanite ivories that were principally Egyptianizing. Commenting on Mycenaean ivories, Emily Vermeule ([1964] 1972) noted interactive influences between the Greek mainland and the Levant. She did not perceive an art style that broadly appealed to elites because it combined elements, but one that was largely Mycenaean with some Orientalizing aspects borne by the ivory's eastern origins. William Stevenson Smith (1965: 107) suggested that an international style had developed early in the Late Bronze Age; like Kantor, he saw it as representing fused motifs from several regions in smaller, more portable art forms. The ivories and other mobile arts from the eastern Mediterranean remain a focus of cross-regional art styles in the Late Bronze Age, and Egypt participated in the production, consumption, and exchange of such styles.

Recent scholarship has focused attention on the royal gift exchange mentioned in the Amarna-period diplomatic correspondence as a backdrop to the development of extra-regional styles of ivories, metal vessels, and jewelry. Yet there is no consensus on the definition of such styles or the degree to which they might directly relate to royal diplomacy (Aruz 2008a, 2008c; Caubet 2008). Marian Feldman (2006) acknowledged the eastern

Mediterranean and Near East as a cradle for various Levantine art styles with an elite consumership, but she also argued for a cross-cultural style without discernible points of origin that could create a shared body of luxury gifts for the Great Powers of the day. Redefined as an “international artistic *koine*,” her small group of elite objects represented a supra-cultural concept of shared (royal) exclusivity. Subjects were frequently animal or hybrid-beasts, vegetation, and agriculture—themes and motifs found throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Near East, and Egypt—yet the addition of the donor’s name should have identified the source.⁷ But no connection between the supra-regional style presumably created for gifting and diplomacy has been made with items mentioned in the Amarna correspondence. And even within this small, exclusive group, some objects clearly belonged not to the royal or palatial sphere but to the temple, and were associated with nonroyal donors. Both inscriptions and depictions on the Tell Basta treasure vessels demonstrate that the objects were not royal exchanges but ritual temple vessels donated by elite personnel and produced in a workshop in the eastern Delta (Lilyquist 2013: 270). The themes of fishing and riverine husbandry on the dish naming one Amy were appropriate in Egyptian iconography for decorating ritual drinking vessels in the temple of Neith. The scene also has close parallels among the Tell el-Far’ah ivories, themselves deeply influenced by Egyptian motifs and thus culturally explicit (unlike Feldman’s *koine* group) (Bryan 1996; Fischer 2011: 196–208; Fischer and Wicke 2011). There is nonetheless general agreement that artistic contact was constant, and motifs moved even more swiftly through regions and eras than previously.

Egypt and the Reception of the Near East

After the expulsion of the Hyksos, direct contact with the Near East was intermittent until the sole reign of Thutmose III, as the material record also reflects. Lilyquist and Brill’s (1993) investigations of early glass indicated that Hatshepsut’s reign was pivotal for glass amulet and bead production in Egypt, but imports of Mittanian and Assyrian glass vessels may have continued after the reign of Thutmose III. A small, handled glass jug naming that king combines shapes and motifs from Egypt and the Levant and was perhaps commissioned to import for the ruler (Roehrig, Dreyfus, and Keller 2005: no. 34). Despite an expedition to inland Syria by Thutmose I, nothing suggests persistent Egyptian military interest in the Levant until the famed siege of Megiddo in Thutmose III’s twenty-third year. During the ensuing fifty years, however, Egypt established control over the southern Levantine city-states and a patchwork of vassal states in modern Lebanon and Syria. As a result, extra-regional movement of artists, seen already in the Middle Bronze palace environment, was intensified by various means, including war captives and elite artistic commissions (Lilyquist 2013). Just as Thutmose III may have

more easily acquired glass vessels from Nuzi or Tell Brak, perhaps as a result of the wars glassmakers were brought to Egypt to produce and instruct others in their craft (Lilyquist and Brill 1993: 9–11). Until at least late Dynasty 18, however, glass vessel production depended on imported ingots and rods, frequently mentioned in Amarna letter exchanges (Rehren and Pusch 1999; Nicholson and Henderson 2000: 195–96). Yet after core-formed glass technology was transferred to the Nile Valley non-Egyptian vessel shapes soon disappeared, perhaps by the reign of Thutmose IV. Could this have been a deliberate hegemonic statement regarding technological ownership? Glass technology apparently remained under royal control during Dynasty 18, and it was thus within the state's power to eliminate foreign shapes (Nicholson and Henderson 2000: 196).

Adapting glass vessels to Egyptian style in no way signaled a lack of interest in foreign luxury arts: multiple Amarna letters specify the status of such exotica (Liverani 2008: 166). Representing foreign objects as prestige gifts to the ruler is characteristic of elite tomb chapel paintings in mid- to late Dynasty 18 and was probably inspired by actual royal audiences, such as that described for Akhenaten in the elite tomb of Huya (Davies 1905: 9, pl. XIII; Darnell and Manassa 2007: 131–36). Similarly, Thutmose III's Annals specified the foreign origin of some presentation and plunder goods. Booty from Megiddo, for example, included "a large amphora in the workmanship of Syria (Kharu) ... and of ebony worked with gold, a statue of that enemy who is there, its head of lapis [lazuli]" (Sethe 1907: 666–67; Lichtheim 1976: 34).

Nonetheless, as Mario Liverani implied, the setting of an exchange or acquisition was just as significant as the objects' exotic nature. A gift exchange among great rulers was a formalized context that added status to the products of both donor and recipient, while ceremonies displaying booty or tribute relegated the presentations to symbols of vassalage.

In fact, Egyptian appreciation for actual foreign objects is not easy to assess, given the paucity of known examples. Lilyquist (1999a, 2005, 2013) proposed a group from the tomb of Tutankhamun, but none preserves a donor's inscription. To assess the level of knowledge of or respect for foreign cultural elements, we must look for ways in which Egyptian art adapted specifically foreign motifs. An interesting example is the military award called "the lion," given during Thutmose III's Syrian campaigns. Represented as a combination of two confronting gold lions framing a more traditional gold fly, it appears in two Theban tombs (TT 200 and 92) spanning the reigns of Thutmose III and early Amenhotep II (Bryan 2001; Binder 2008). The soldier Amenemheb (TT 85), who described his activity during the Syrian Eighth Campaign of Year 33, twice received this award (Bryan 2000: 74–76; Redford 2003: 168–72). The lion was, of course, a royal animal for the Egyptians, and lions accompanied the king on the battlefield. Thus a brave soldier was a "lion on the battlefield" in proxy for the king.⁸ Yet the award's particular attachment to

the Syrian campaigns, when the Mittani rulers were themselves engaged, may also be relevant. The king may have wished in awarding his soldiers to transform the Mittani king's own logo, for the seal of the Mittani king Saushtatar, contemporary with Thutmose III's campaigns, consisted of two facing lions enclosing a winged disk with eagles on the back of the lions (see [Figure 21.3](#) in Ataç, this volume). The overall design has much in common with the lion and fly pectoral. Yet for centuries the iconography of the winged disk and confronting leonine forms had been imagery available for elite art in the Near East (such as the pectoral of Senwosret III mentioned earlier). Thus the award's deliberate resemblance to the Mittani seal can only be suggested.

Another motif with non-Egyptian origins became a symbol for the protection of pharaonic power in later Dynasty 18. The Aegean griffin had appeared in the Levant and Egypt earlier in the Bronze Age, but it reemerged in Egyptian art after the reign of Ahmose (see above). Occasionally it was replaced by the female sphinx with uplifted wing wearing a headdress associated with Egyptian and foreign goddesses. The earliest examples date from the reign of Amenhotep III. Adapted from the Aegean griffin with raised wing, this image resonated both within Egypt and throughout the Near East in the Late Bronze Age (Helck [1955](#); Eggebrecht [1977](#); Bryan [1996](#): 69–73; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic [2013](#): 185, fig. 12). Within Egypt in particular, this sphinx replaced a simple lion at the side of Horemheb's royal throne on his statue now in Turin (ca. 1300 BCE) (Bryan [1996](#): 70). Like the leonine goddesses Sakhmet and Tefnut and their counterparts, the female winged sphinx acted to protect the sun god and his earthly representative, the Egyptian ruler.

Part of an ivory openwork inlay from Megiddo dated 1300–1100 BCE, probably belonging to a local ruler in contact with the Egyptian hegemony, illustrates Levantine emulation of this imagery (Bryan [1996](#): 69–73; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans [2008](#): no. 84). Although we cannot know whether the iconography's ideological force was identical in Megiddo and Egypt, Canaan's vassal network surely encouraged city-state rulers to employ Egyptian-styled imagery (Fischer [2011](#): 196–208; Oren [2012](#)). Megiddo's reuse of this foreign-influenced Egyptian icon exemplifies the cross-fertilization of art forms that we witnessed already in the late Neolithic. Thus definitively to associate the resultant image with a particular culture or ethnicity may be less important than putting it in its proper social, technological, and functional context (Gunter [2009](#): 91–106). For example, the often-discussed ivory bed inlays from Ugarit have frequently been associated with the diplomatic context of the Amarna era or earlier (Feldman [2002](#): 16). The panels, from a late thirteenth- or early twelfth-century context, are rendered in an Egyptian style but include many elements of Ugaritic royal and religious ideology (Heltzer [1982](#): 178–85; Feldman [2013](#)). The Egyptian style betrays an awareness of later Dynasty 19 portrait traits, such as the long ski-slope brow and nose shape and the long ovoid eye with convexly carved

eyelid above—elements that developed together, particularly in the reign of Ramesses II (1279–1212 BCE). The mobility of artists is relevant here, for a cuneiform text attests that the ruler of Ugarit asked Merneptah (or more likely his successor Seti II) to send an Egyptian sculptor to Ugarit to create a statue of Merneptah (Lackenbacher 1995; Safronov 2013). The request was refused or delayed, and carpenters were offered instead (Scandone Matthiae 2000). The ivories might better be understood as a work for the Ugaritic royal household and its ideology (Heltzer 1982).

The Tell Basta Treasure (Figure 22.3) and the ivories from southern Canaan also help narrate how Egypt was changing at the end of the Late Bronze Age. The primary Egyptian residences of Dynasties 19 and 20 were in the eastern Delta, leading to the Levant and Egypt's vassal network. Tell Basta's two finds of vessels and jewels appear to have been made in mid- to late Dynasty 19 (ca. 1230–1200 BCE), produced by artisans either themselves Levantine or trained in their techniques. Lilyquist (2012: 33–38) demonstrates that at least some of these objects were dedicated by elites whose spheres of operation were in the Levant; she believes that both artisans and patrons were of foreign origin. The treasure's decorative patterns, also seen on the Late Bronze Age ivories from Tell el-Far'ah, Megiddo, and elsewhere, represent communication during later Dynasty 19 between Egyptian Delta cities and the southern vassal and city-states (Gubel 2000a; Fischer 2011: 205–8).



Figure 22.3 Repoussé bowl decorated with marsh scenes, agriculture, farming, husbandry, and wine-making activities. Tell Basta; Dynasty 19 (thirteenth–twelfth century BCE). Silver; dia. 20.7 cm. Rogers Fund, 1907. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 07.228.20.

© The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Yet the Tell Basta vessels also tell another story, representing the beginning of trends that occur through the first millennium BCE. The vessels' largely Egyptian motifs include numerous depictions of watery settings and riverine activities, appropriately used to decorate cult vessels for temples—for Bastet at Tell Basta but also, according to one inscription, for the goddess Neith of Sais. These were drinking and pouring vessels for a festival such as the Festivals of Drunkenness (Lilyquist 2012: 20–21; Bryan 2014). In addition, they were donations by specific elite patrons apparently involved in duties external to Egypt. In many cases their names and titles were inscribed on the vessels. Lilyquist (2012: 34–41) suggested a direct link in use and style between the Tell Basta vessels and the later “Phoenician” vessels; she also noted a connection with early first-millennium faience chalices. Moreover, these temple vessels represented a large amount of gold and silver placed in

temple treasuries and therefore exempted from deposit in the tombs of these same elites. The end of the New Kingdom brought economic deprivation, and tomb-robbing—even in the Valley of the Kings—was widespread, if not indeed conducted by the heads of government themselves. The deposit of wealth in burials began to focus on temple environments, perhaps because of their relative security compared with the cemeteries (Taylor 2010). This shift, in concert with a new political configuration in the north, led to changing patterns of Egyptian involvement with the Near East.

Interconnections in the First Millennium BCE

During the period between 1070 and 664 BCE, “the influence of Egyptian imagery, and of imagery inspired by Egypt, exceeded the country’s political weight and its importance as a trading partner” (Hill 2014: 198). The dissemination of Egyptian-styled images on ivories, metal vessels, and amulets spread throughout the Levant, Assyria, and across the Mediterranean (López Castro 2006), not through Egyptian state involvement with production centers but as a consequence of Neo-Assyrian imperial reconfiguration of new conquests in western Asia (Gunter 2009: 100–2). Nonetheless, ivories with Egyptianizing motifs display contemporaneous visual elements: for example, a plaque from Arslan Taş with squatting divine child figures flanked by winged protective deities (Gubel 2000a, 2000b). The imagery of the squatting divine child, identified with the king in cultic divine triads throughout Egypt’s temple landscape, was common to Dynasties 21 to 25 (Hill 2014). Others argue that the precise iconography resulted instead from Phoenicians residing in the Delta, or perhaps mobile craftsmen moving in and out of the area (Gubel 2000a). Perhaps both factors were at play.

The broad dissemination of Egyptian visual culture is commonly attributed to exchange, with goods carried by merchants and sailors who moved around the eastern Mediterranean. Gregory Mumford (2007: 145–55) has thus explained the archaeological record of the Levant, suggesting that after the campaigns of Dynasty 22, trade—especially Phoenician trade—was the primary means of moving Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects. But he offers no evidence for such trade in the Iron 2 period corresponding to Dynasties 22 to 25, relying instead on the literary text of Wenamun written around 1050 BCE (Lichtheim 1976: 224–32). Textual references to Egyptian items in the Levant include Neo-Assyrian inscriptions that record various means of acquisition, but not commercial trade (Gunter 2009: 125–54). Biblical references cannot be accepted as historical documentation other than in a general manner, so the archaeological remains provide the best evidence. Yet these data do not help establish how objects from Egypt reached the Levant.

Between the tenth and seventh centuries Egypt was ruled by kings referred to

generally as Libyan, from families that emerged from tribal groups from the west who settled in the Delta, and then by Kushites who conquered and merged Egypt with Sudan (Hill 2014). Despite their origins, these rulers behaved publicly much as their predecessors had for thousands of years: following campaigns against foreign regions, they made temple donations to display their relationship with the gods. Shoshenq I, perhaps the king who sacked the Temple of Jerusalem in the tenth century BCE, celebrated his campaign before Amun-Re of Karnak, and several immediate successors also sent expeditions to the Levant (Mumford 2007). Near Tell Basta, a large donation inscription recorded every gift the king (apparently Osorkon I) had given to Egyptian temples. It lists quantities of precious metals and lapis lazuli, and approached half a million Troy pounds of silver, in addition to gold (Breasted 1906: 362–66). Although such temple donations and expedition accounting was typical of Egyptian monumental records, such detailed donation records seem to have intensified, as the Harris Papyrus of Dynasty 20 attests (Grandet 1994). When in the mid-eighth century the Kushite king Piye (Piankhy) defeated the city of Memphis that housed the great temple of Ptah, he turned all the treasuries and granaries over to that temple as an endowment, thus solidifying his role as legitimate ruler who offers to the gods (Lichtheim 1980: 76). The regional state wealth at Memphis was thus retained through deposit in the temple of Ptah, while the personal wealth of defeated Delta rulers was taken to Nubia.

The temple could function as a protected setting for the administration of wealth, as the inscriptions cited attest. The burial of those goods, if it may be considered a form of storage, was best protected within temple precincts. The tombs of Dynasty 21 and 22 kings and family members in the temple precinct of Amun at Tanis contained large amounts of gold and silver in the form of burial goods—wealth stolen from royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and largely refashioned for the Tanite rulers (Reeves 1990). Ultimately, we see the rulers of the earlier first millennium accounting for, moving, and tracking wealth in the form of precious materials, undoubtedly due to its finite nature. Temples provided a means of storing and protecting amassed wealth for the rulers, but elites also made donations of valuable materials throughout the sanctuaries of Egypt (Hill 2014: 199). In particular, small-scale bronze statues were dedicated in large numbers by rulers and elites alike, and the figures' small size enabled donors to provide gifts in large and small shrines as well as in memorial chapels for saints and even in foreign sanctuaries such as the Heraion on Samos (Davis 2007; Gunter 2009: 150–53).

Indeed, the increasing prominence of goddess cults in Egypt during the early first millennium, like Bastet at Tell Basta, encouraged intentional networking with temple institutions elsewhere, such as Greek sanctuaries of Hera and Athena. Following Ingrid Strøm, Ann Gunter (2009: 150–54) has argued persuasively that Egyptian finds from sanctuaries in Greece and the eastern

Aegean represent groups and types of objects whose symbolic valences and ritual uses were known by the cult personnel. Kousoulis and Morenz (2007) have argued similarly for Rhodian donations by Saite rulers and elites. Rather than votive gifts, they were cult implements used within a broad network of goddesses' temples from Egypt to Samos to Argolis. Archaeological evidence in the Levant may reflect a similar process. The presence of divine amulets of Egyptian type in nearly 10 percent of all grave assemblages of the Iron 2b period may well indicate that, as in the contemporary Greek sanctuaries, these objects were used by knowledgeable consumers who acquired the amulets for religious purposes. The decline of Egyptian objects later in the Iron 2b period perhaps reflected the western growth of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (Mumford 2007: 169; Gunter 2009: 34–49).

Thus the mechanisms for transferring objects from one region to another should not be assumed. A study of Egyptian documentation for merchants in external trade in the Late Bronze Age and later demonstrated that the title *šwty* referred to agents of exchange between institutions, whether internal to Egypt or outside (Römer 1992). Wenamun, although not designated as *šwty* in the story, represented the temple of Amun-Re, and his title “elder of the portal” was held by a *šwty* in the Chronicle of Osorkon. In numerous instances the title is associated with the name of a temple, and such officials acted to effect exchanges on behalf of two or more noncommercial institutions. The production and dissemination throughout the early first millennium world of large numbers of amulets, figurines, and shabtis may have been the province of temples.

The Statue of Darius and Egypt in the Achaemenid Era (ca. 525–330 BCE)

Egypt's role as a dominant power in the ancient world underwent a reversal during the first millennium. Conquered over a period of eight hundred years by Sudanese, Assyrians, Persians, Macedonians, and Romans, the Nile Valley had only a few short-lived native dynasties (26, 28–30, for example). Yet the kings of Dynasties 26 and 30 nonetheless involved themselves in external politics and behaved at home like traditional pharaohs, building monuments and sponsoring the arts. When the Achaemenid king Cambyses defeated Egypt in 525 BCE, he and later Darius took control of a vibrant elite culture whose activities on behalf of their rulers, their gods, and themselves were monumentally celebrated on statues and stelae that were dedicated in temples from the Delta to Aswan (Baines 1996; Bassir 2013). The most famous example is the statue of the chief physician and admiral Wedjahorresnet

(Figure 22.4). Its form and text serve to demonstrate how Egypt's artisans had maintained the ability seen at the beginning of Dynasty 18 to receive foreign elements, incorporate, and even re-Egyptianize them. The statue of Darius (Figure 22.5) serves as an excellent comparison for this process.



Figure 22.4 Statue of Wedjahorresnet. Sais; Dynasty 27, reign of Darius, year 3 (519 BCE). Basalt; h. 96 cm. Musei Vaticani, Museo Egizio 22690.

Photo Vatican Museums.



Figure 22.5 Statue of Darius (522–486 BCE). Susa, monumental gate east of

Palace of Darius. Granite (graywacke); pres. h. of statue 51 cm, base 104 × 64 cm.

Photograph courtesy of French Archaeological Mission in Susa.

Wedjahorresnet had served under the last Saite pharaoh, Psamtik III, then became an advisor to Cambyses, for whom he created an appropriate Egyptian ruler's titulary. Finally he became chief physician to Darius, whom he apparently followed to Susa (Moyer 2006). After his return to Egypt, Wedjahorresnet carried out restoration activities in Egyptian temples and scriptoria, and his statue dedicated in the temple of Neith at Sais bears a famous set of inscriptions. John Baines (1996) has persuasively argued that the viewer and reader of the statue's texts would learn primarily of Wedjahorresnet as the stabilizer of Egypt, a role normative to kings, but often preempted by elites during periods of weakened kingship. Although he spoke of his important functions on behalf of the Egyptian and Persian kings, Wedjahorresnet presented himself holding a naos, as a pious servant of the deity in dedicatory pose. This statue type had retained its cultural meaning throughout centuries of defeat and foreign rule. Wedjahorresnet had worked to maintain that meaning by helping Persian rulers perform traditional pharaonic roles, such as the taking of a titulary and the renovation of temples.

Yet Ian Moyer (2006: 245–46) has observed that despite the statue's traditional Egyptian form and inscription, it shows the physician wearing gold bracelets of a Persian style, and the inscription states that he received gold ornaments from all his lords. The chief physician referred to these gifts as awards, such as the "lion" discussed earlier. Perhaps the Persian king's participation in a gift redistribution was a means of securing loyal fealty, so that the exact valence was not identical in Susa and Sais. Yet Wedjahorresnet portrayed as identical the acts of his Saite and his Persian ruler.

The chief physician's statue was carved from the same stone as the superb Darius statue found in Susa (see Figure 22.5). The greywacke from the Wadi Hammamat in Egypt's eastern desert was a preferred material for royal and elite statues from the Old Kingdom onward, but especially in the Saite era (Yoyotte 2010). The over life-sized royal statue was made of Egyptian stone and carved in Egypt using Egyptian sculptural techniques. Yet its form and inscriptions made it, as Henry Colburn (2014) observes, "art of the empire," meaning that it communicated Achaemenid royal ideology in a style that deliberately and carefully combined the styles and iconographies of the far-flung empire. The result was an ideological appropriation of all regions over which the Persian king ruled, in a manner similar to, but less violent than, Neo-Assyrian imperial art (Briant 1999: 105–6; Colburn 2014).

Achaemenid influence in Egypt's traditional elite and monumental environment remained minimal, although some private monuments from Memphis display Persian attributes and may have been commissioned for

foreigners (Wasmuth 2010). Thus while personal ornament was a common way to identify clients and others in the Neo-Assyrian period and in official Achaemenid art, to the Egyptian viewer Wedjahorresnet's bracelet visually confirmed his connection to the Persian rulers (Gunter 2009: 170–73; Colburn 2014). Yet in its elements of similarity with the Darius statue, Wedjahorresnet's statue suggests a manipulation of the king's official portrait. Darius wears an Achaemenid court robe with draped but stylized folds and carries an Elamite dagger. In one hand he holds a cylinder, "in keeping with Egyptian sculptural practice" (Colburn 2014: 86). The flower in his proper right hand is not Egyptian, and of course he wears shoes, a Persian feature. The Egyptian artisans have placed the cuneiform inscriptions (DSab) along the lower folds of the robe, and hieroglyphic inscriptions on the belt, the garment folds, and the top and sides of the base.

The statue base utilizes iconic Egyptian images of fecundity figures tying together the plants of Upper and Lower Egypt on the front and the rear, although those images are normally placed on the sides. The small figures on the sides of the base are distinguished by clothing and attributes as peoples of the Achaemenid Empire; their arms are raised in a gesture that in Achaemenid art indicates support of the king (Roaf 1974: 74; Colburn 2014: 787). The closest Egyptian parallel may be the altar of Taharqa at Gebel Barkal in Sudan, where on front and back fecundity figures also tie the plants of Upper and Lower Egypt, and Taharqa appears four times holding up the heavens as the god Shu (Porter and Moss 1952: 220). While the sculptors of Darius's statue could have known other monuments, the altar could be recognized as a model for the statue base. Ultimately, the statue should be seen as an Achaemenid imperial portrait with Egyptian forms, innovatively designed and sculpted by Egyptian artisans.

How, then, might Wedjahorresnet's statue have utilized the royal statue? Both are carved from Egyptian greywacke. Both depict the subject in a striding pose with a central focus for the viewer at waist and below, where Wedjahorresnet holds the naos and Darius folds his left arm above the dagger at his belt. But to the Egyptian viewer the unique element on the chief physician's statue is the inscription on the front of the figure, which is carved on the garment in vertical columns. Beneath the elaborately pleated and draped robe closing above breast level the inscriptions that Baines labeled B and b cover the garment three-dimensionally, and are intended only to inscribe the clothing; at the back, the inscription stops at the top of the garment. The columns here uniquely create garment pleats, and Wedjahorresnet's figure is thus inscribed on his formal garb, just as was Darius's. There is no parallel for this approach to the inscription, and even the best parallel for the Persian clothing and accoutrements, the Ptahhotep statue now in Brooklyn, places the inscriptions in a traditional Egyptian fashion, as a surface covering (Bothmer 1960: 76–77, figs. 151–53). Yet, seen from the

front of the statue, the naos texts, as Baines noted, are traditional in form and content; and because the columns are a typical Egyptian way of treating inscriptions, the truly innovative approach to the garment nonetheless re-Egyptianizes the foreign approach. Wedjahorresnet's statue thus emulated that of the Persian king, and its inscriptions did likewise (Baines 1996). After centuries of conquest by outside powers, the Egyptian elites and their artisans continued to adapt Egyptian art to current circumstances and create new Egyptian art forms.

Conclusions

Over some four millennia, Egypt was influenced by and influenced the arts of the ancient Near East. During the period of state formation in the late fourth millennium, artisans utilized for Egypt's elite imagery current in Sumer and Elam, as well as the Levant. By the time of the centralized kingship in early Dynasty 1 (ca. 3100 BCE), borrowed images, such as griffins and serpent-necked felines, were adapted to perform as Egyptian cultural symbols. Symbolism exported from Egypt to the Levant in the third millennium and later was equally employed to represent regional relationships with the Nile Valley rulers.

The more cosmopolitan nature of the Late Bronze Age, encouraged by the imperial powers of Egypt, Mittani, Hatti, and Assyria, resulted in more exchange of image vocabularies, and some have identified true "international styles" during this period. Clearly Egypt influenced Levantine elite art and was itself far more receptive to foreign artistic technologies (glass and goldworking), but also continued to express imported forms in Egyptian terms, as seen in the adaptations to the flying gallop borrowed from the Near East and Aegean. In the first millennium new forms continued to appear in Egypt under Persian influence, as the statue of Wedjahorresnet demonstrates. Yet throughout the period the Near East and Egypt continued interconnections through donations at religious centers. Through such exchanges their artistic forms were maintained, respected, and even replicated by others.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Artistic connections within the Near East, Egypt, and the eastern Mediterranean have been the subject of major exhibitions and accompanying catalogues in recent years. Aruz, Benzal, and Evans 2008 and Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2013 are invaluable sources for the study of Near Eastern arts in communication. For those interested in Bronze Age technologies the

contributions by Christine Lilyquist listed in the References will be highly useful, particularly Lilyquist 2012. Gunter 2009 analyzes the various types of networks that characterized first-millennium artistic exchanges. Feldman 2006 offers a challenging approach to the Late Bronze Age cosmopolitanism.

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NOTES

1. Compare the amounts of lapis mentioned in the Amarna Letters—including dowry and wedding gift lists—where a greeting gift might include two to four minas of lapis lazuli, about 1–2 kilograms (Heltzer 1994; Moran 2002: nos. 1–65).
2. Eder (1995: 9–10, 22–23) proposes synchronisms with the high chronology he uses.
3. For example, the 'Isy expedition brought back 125 deben of new copper, while the expedition to the Lebanon region brought back 15,961.

4. The Autobiography of Ahmose of Ebana refers to Ahmose's siege of Sharuhenn after the Hyksos were expelled (Lichtheim 1976: 13).
5. Possibly also Tell el-Dab'a, although the excavator assigns all the frescoes to Thutmoside Dynasty 18.
6. Helck's (1983: 57–58) translation differs significantly from the one Bourriau (2000: 181) cites, in which Thoth's scribal function is attributed to Auserre, but the text does not so indicate. Despite lacunae, the beginning clearly describes Atu as the "scribe of Re."
7. Kim Benzel (2013) applied a similar methodology in interpreting metal plaques with female body elements, widely distributed in the Levant and eastern Mediterranean. Her analysis eliminated the divine identities represented on the plaques, emphasizing instead the sexuality of the female anatomy.
8. Maiherpri, a foreign soldier who served Thutmose III and was granted burial in the Valley of the Kings, has as his name the epithet "lion on the battlefield" (Lilyquist 2005: 62–64).

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Ancient Near East and the Bronze Age Aegean

Marian H. Feldman

Introduction

The topic of interactions between the ancient Near East and the Aegean during the Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1200/1100 BCE) presents a fundamental complication: the difficulty of distinguishing between “the Near East” and “the Aegean.” This problem becomes particularly evident if the border between the contemporary states of Turkey and Greece serves as the dividing line. While the border may align with modern conceptions separating Asia from Europe and East from West, the horizons of Bronze Age cultures, as reconstructed from artifactual assemblages, challenge this geographical dichotomy (Greaves 2010; Mac Sweeney 2011). Analysis of the material culture reveals, instead, interacting cultural spheres that stretch across this modern divide.

One can speak of an eastern Mediterranean interaction zone: the Levant–Cyprus–western Anatolia–the Aegean–Crete–the eastern Greek mainland. But it had limited inland reach into Greater Mesopotamia or the farther eastern extents of the Near East, which in turn comprise a second major interaction sphere. Throughout much of the two thousand years of the Bronze Age, these two interaction zones—one spanning the eastern Mediterranean, northern Aegean, and Anatolia, the other extending over Greater Mesopotamia and Iran—remained relatively distinct. This pattern began to change toward the end of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200/1100 BCE), as cultural interactions intensified, with dynamic results, during the subsequent Iron Age period. Yet at all times, cultural influence and its directionality elude simple mapping, as the many shifting cultural entities participated in the interaction zones with differing frequency and intensity.

This chapter surveys some of the patterns of interaction between Aegean and Near Eastern cultural entities during the Early, Middle, and Late Bronze Ages, highlighting continuities and changes over time. Architecture, while relevant to the topic, can be given only limited coverage here; fuller accounts may be found in several recent publications (for example, Hult 1983; Hitchcock 2005; Bretschneider, Driessen, and van Lerberghe 2007; Yasur-Landau et al. 2012).

The Early Bronze Age (ca. 3000–2000 BCE)

During the Early Bronze Age (EB), the emerging elite society of Crete enjoyed sporadic, perhaps chance, contacts primarily with places to the south, across the Mediterranean, namely Egypt and Libya (Colburn 2008). The northern Aegean, however, whose islands served as stepping-stones connecting mainland Greece and northwestern Turkey, sustained close connections with Anatolia, making this a close-knit and dynamic zone of interaction and exchange. In the second half of the third millennium (roughly EB II to EB III), this entire northern area experienced an increase in social complexity accompanied by advances in metalworking technologies, what Aslihan Yener (2000: 3) has called an “arc of metals” stretching from Iran and the Caucasus through Anatolia and northern Greece into the Balkans. Metalworking appears to have been central to these developmental processes, though it remains unclear to what extent it drove development or instead resulted from it; most likely, there was a combination of the two (Yener 2000; Muhly 2011). A long history of metalworking in Anatolia predated the Bronze Age, especially in the east, where experimentation with copperworking began in the Neolithic period (Muhly 2011).

Both tin-bronze (as opposed to arsenical bronze) production and sophisticated goldworking techniques such as granulation and filigree flourished in northwestern Anatolia during the Early Bronze Age. Distribution patterns of jewelry forms and production techniques articulate a network of interactions stretching from Greece through Anatolia, northern Syria, and into southern Mesopotamia (Aruz 2003: 241–44). The exquisite gold jewelry comprising the so-called Trojan Gold, discovered in the late nineteenth century by Heinrich Schliemann during his explorations at Troy (Hisarlık) in northwestern Turkey, represents one (albeit spectacular) example within this network (Tolstikov and Treister 1996; Muhly 2011: 867). Especially close ties with artifacts in the Trojan Gold are visible in items such as gold basket earrings worked in filigree and granulation with dangling pendants of cutout gold sheet found at Poliochni on the northern Aegean island of Lemnos (Figure 23.1), a site that shares with the Troad other cultural features such as architecture and town planning (Bernabò-Brea 1976). The manufacture of the Trojan Gold appears to fall firmly in the EB II period (ca. 2500–2300 BCE), correlating with the dates of the Poliochni material (ca. 2450–2200 BCE) (Muhly 2011: 867). Similar items, though generally less technically elaborate, appear at EB II/III Aegean sites farther from Anatolia, including Mochlos on Crete (Davaras 1975). The appearance of tin-based copper alloys on various Aegean islands and at mainland Greek sites further emphasizes the ties connecting this interaction zone (Reinholdt 2003a), which continued to be active and important throughout the Bronze Age and later.



Figure 23.1 Basket earrings with dangling pendants. Lemnos, Poliochni; Early Bronze Age (ca. 2450–2200 BCE). Gold; l. 6.7–7.8 cm. Athens, National Archaeological Museum 7159.

Image © National Archaeological Museum, Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Sports, Archaeological Receipts Fund. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

The northern Aegean–Anatolian interaction zone exhibits less intense, but nevertheless influential connections with areas farther east and south, primarily in the transfer of metals and metalworking technologies. A collection of ornaments including gold sheet pendants similar in shape to those found on the basket earrings at Troy and Poliochni were excavated from a burial at Tell Banat in Syria (ca. 2500–2250 BCE) (Aruz with Wallenfels 2003: no. 123). Examples of filigree and granulation on gold ornaments appear among the sumptuous offerings of the Early Dynastic IIIA Royal Cemetery at Ur (ca. 2600–2400 BCE) (Maxwell-Hyslop 1971: 51, fig. 34; Pittman 1998: 89; on granulation, see also Politis 2001), while smaller quantities of such precious adornments were found in burial and hoard contexts at Mari, Tell Brak, and Umm el-Marra in Syria (for example, Aruz with Wallenfels 2003: nos. 86, 118). Since gold, silver, and copper are not native to these areas of Greater Mesopotamia, we can postulate the movement of both finished objects and raw materials—along with the technologies to work them—from the western areas of the Aegean and Anatolia. The source of tin, essential for producing bronze, remains uncertain (Yener 2000; Muhly 2011). The likelihood that at least some of the tin used in EB bronze production came from Central Asia, however, suggests a Mesopotamian role

in its westward movement, as texts of the second millennium attest. The recent find of a small carnelian bead with white etched concentric circles in a jewelry hoard at Kolonna, on the island of Aigina in the Saronic Gulf (Reinholdt 2003b), highlights the long chain of connections linking the Aegean world to Anatolia, northern Syria, Mesopotamia, and beyond. Such beads can be traced to the Indus Valley and appear frequently in Mesopotamia, for example, in the Royal Cemetery at Ur (Pittman 1998: 111). Nonetheless, connections between the Aegean and Mesopotamia, while noteworthy, appear to follow an indirect, down-the-line distribution pattern along a mostly inland route.

The Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000–1600 BCE)

During the Middle Bronze Age, the rise of the Minoan palaces on Crete coincided with an intensification of relations throughout the eastern Mediterranean, embracing nearly all the coastal areas of the Levant, southern and southwestern Anatolia, Egypt, and Cyprus. As with the Early Bronze Age exchanges in the northern Aegean and northwestern Anatolia, Middle Bronze Age interactions were in large part driven by the desire to acquire metal resources, especially copper and tin for bronze production. While the copper resources of eastern Anatolia remained in use and at the nexus of an inland north Syrian–southeast Anatolian exchange system, during the second millennium a new source—in the western mountains of Cyprus—became dominant. The shift to Cypriot copper parallels a concomitant shift to a more southerly, Mediterranean-based interaction zone, although the northern Aegean and Anatolian zone remained active. Tin most likely derived from mines farther east in Central Asia and had to traverse Iran and Mesopotamia before reaching the Mediterranean, as a remarkable eighteenth-century BCE tablet from the palace at Mari on the Middle Euphrates attests. The text lists places and people involved in long-distance transactions for tin coming from the east (in Iran) to the west (on the Mediterranean coast) (Aruz 2008: 3–4). The text also mentions merchants from Kaphtor (Crete) present on the Levantine coast, highlighting the Levant’s role as mediator between the maritime and inland trade routes. The Mediterranean-based exchange of metals is well illustrated by the later, Late Bronze Age Uluburun shipwreck (ca. 1300 BCE), which sank off the southern coast of Turkey while carrying ten tons of Cypriot copper and one ton of tin, among other cargo (Pulak 2008; and see below).

Two much-discussed indicators of this Mediterranean interaction are the presence in the Near East of Cretan Kamares ware pottery and Aegean-style frescoes. Middle Minoan I–II Kamares ware, produced on Crete during the first centuries of the second millennium BCE, was a fine luxury ware

decorated with polychrome designs formed from geometric and vegetal forms (Koehl 2008b). A small number of such vessels have been found in the Near East, mainly at the northern Levantine coastal sites of Ugarit, Byblos, Beirut, and Sidon (Merrillees 2003; MacGillivray 2004). One theory proposes that these imports inspired the distinctive painted Nuzi ware with its light-on-dark patterns and floral designs, associated with the northern Mesopotamian state of Mittani (Stein 1984; Pfälzner with von Rüdén 2008: no. 120a, b). The chronological parameters do not appear to support this hypothesis, however, as Nuzi ware dates to the Late Bronze Age (fifteenth–fourteenth centuries BCE; cf. Pfälzner with von Rüdén 2008: no. 120a, b). Moreover, the small quantity of Kamares ware in the Levant—around twenty-two vessels have been discovered to date (Koehl 2008b)—suggests that the pottery was acquired by individuals in the Near East only sporadically and unsystematically. This situation contrasts sharply with that of the Late Bronze Age, when Mycenaean pottery was systematically imported in massive quantities and distributed over a much broader geographical extent (Leonard 1994; Wijngaarden 2002). That all of the Levantine sites where Aegean pottery (Kamares or Mycenaean) has been discovered have also yielded Cypriot pottery, generally in much greater quantities, points to the central role the island must have played as a middleman between the two regions.

Yet frescoes of distinctively Aegean type also appeared during the Middle Bronze Age at several sites around the Mediterranean, hinting at more intimate Aegean–eastern Mediterranean interactions. In Near Eastern buildings, painted walls and floors were in themselves nothing new, having been produced at least since the Neolithic period (Nunn 1988). But a group of paintings dating from the Middle to Late Bronze Age contrasts strikingly both with earlier and contemporaneous paintings in the Near East. These paintings not only exhibit styles and motifs familiar from the Aegean world, but also employ the true fresco (*al fresco*) painting technique characterized by the use of pigments suspended in water and applied directly onto a damp lime plaster surface (Brysbaert 2008).

The distribution pattern of the Aegean-type frescoes, while probably suffering some lacunae, outlines two or perhaps three zones. Examples from Miletos on Turkey's western coast (Niemeier 2005: 7) and Trianda on Rhodes (Immerwahr 1990: 190; Marketou 2010: 781) should be understood as part of the Aegean realm, closely linked to frescoes found at sites in Crete and the Cyclades, including Akrotiri on Thera, Phylakopi on Melos, and Ayia Irini on Kea (Immerwahr 1990). Inhabiting a more easterly zone are those examples found along the Levantine coast, including (from north to south): Alalakh (Tell Atchana), in the Amuq plain in present-day Turkey (Level VII palace and Level IV houses) (Woolley 1955; B. Niemeier and Niemeier 2000); Qatna (Tell Mishrife), on the middle Orontes River in Syria (palace) (von Rüdén 2011); and Tel Kabri, on the coast of the northern Akko Valley in Israel

(palace) (B. Niemeier and Niemeier 2002; Cline, Yasur-Landau, and Goshen 2011). Remains of impressive frescoes associated with a palatial structure at Avaris (Tell el-Dab'a), in Egypt's eastern Delta (Bietak, Marinatos, and Palivou 2007, with references), may comprise a zone separate from the Levant. Tellingly, the Near Eastern *al fresco* paintings exist in close geographical proximity to those that employ the traditional painting technique of pigments mixed with a binder (such as egg white or yolk, oil, or honey) applied to a dry support of any material (*al secco*). In the Levant, such *al secco* paintings have recently been found at Tell Sakka near Damascus (Taraqji 1999; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 70a, b; Brysbaert 2008: 155) and Tell Burak near Sidon (Kamlah and Sader 2010). These join the well-known corpus of *al secco* paintings from the palace at Mari in inland Syria (Muller 2005, with references).

While one might envisage numerous means by which single pieces of pottery could have traveled from the Aegean to the Levant, the situation is quite different for frescoes, which by their very nature must have been painted in the place where they were discovered. Moreover, the specific technological knowledge required to execute true fresco indicates either the exchange of such knowledge through sustained and intense contacts or the extensive movement of artists trained in the technique (Brysbaert 2008). Although a Near Eastern origin for these frescoes has occasionally been proposed (for example, Sherratt 1994), their quantity and widespread distribution in the Aegean, especially on Crete and nearby islands such as Thera, argue for this region as their primary home (Feldman 2008). By contrast, true frescoes exhibiting Aegean stylistic elements and motifs occur outside of the Aegean region in only a few isolated instances and exclusively in the settlement's most important administrative building. As such, they should be understood as exotica displayed by elites in an effort to consolidate political authority (Feldman 2007; von Rden 2011). Their appearance in coastal areas of the Levant and the Egyptian Delta reflects the close ties between these regions and the southern Aegean world, especially Crete and the Cyclades, during the later Middle Bronze and early Late Bronze Ages.

Although the specific form of Aegean-style frescoes—their true fresco technique combined with a fairly restricted stylistic and iconographic repertoire—is most at home in the region of Crete and nearby Aegean islands, the expanding interaction zone of the eastern Mediterranean over the course of the second millennium enabled this artistic form to be adopted and adapted by a variety of different entities. Executed *al secco* and with mainly Mesopotamian motifs and styles, the Mari paintings indicate the general lack of inland penetration of the Mediterranean interaction zone (Winter 2000; Muller 2005). Nonetheless, we do have evidence for occasional contacts between the Middle Euphrates and the eastern Mediterranean coast. In the eighteenth century BCE, the ruler of Mari, Zimri-Lim, traveled to the great

emporium of Ugarit on Syria's Mediterranean coast, and an ambassador of the king of Ugarit visited the palace at Mari (Sasson 2008). On his trip, Zimri-Lim brought both a large retinue (more than four thousand men) and impressive luxury gifts that were reciprocated. Such a scenario suggests mechanisms through which knowledge of large-scale arts such as wall paintings could have been transmitted and small-scale arts exchanged. Indeed, references to luxury items from Kaphtor occur in the Mari texts (Guichard 1999), and the Mari paintings preserve indirect allusions to Aegean motifs, such as in their imitation marbling (Winter 2000).

The recently excavated frescoes from the palace at Qatna, which significantly expand upon and clarify the fragments found by R. du Mesnil du Buisson in the early twentieth century (von Rüden 2011: 31–32), signal the role that the inland Orontes River valley played as a meeting ground between the Mediterranean Sea-based interaction zone and the inland, Greater Mesopotamian/Iranian interaction zone. The Qatna wall paintings exhibit an intriguing hybridization both of painting technique (largely *al fresco* but also *al secco*, and variations in between) and motifs and style (such as the typically Aegean dolphins and marbled rocks alongside more Mesopotamian turtles and date clusters) (Figure 23.2). According to Constance von Rüden (2011), who reconstructed them, the paintings are the end result of a lengthy process of adoption and adaptation that began in the Middle Bronze Age with the earliest appearance of frescoes in the Levant at Alalakh. This conclusion rests on her late dating of the Qatna paintings to around 1500 BCE, a date that not everyone accepts—including the site's director of excavations, Peter Pfälzner (Pfälzner with von Rüden 2008). Yet even Pfälzner dates the paintings only as early as the sixteenth century, still a century later than the paintings of Alalakh Level VII (dated to the late eighteenth or seventeenth century BCE) (Heinz 1992). In either case, and bolstered by evidence from other sites such as Tel Kabri, the emerging picture suggests an extended period during the Middle Bronze Age of more-than-incidental contacts between the Levant and the Aegean region. Pfälzner, for example, has proposed a scenario in which Aegean- and locally trained craftsmen worked together at Qatna, hybridizing their artistic practices in ways that complicate any strict dichotomy between “the Aegean” and “the Near East” (Pfälzner with von Rüden 2008; von Rüden 2014).



Figure 23.2 Wall painting fragments, marine scene with turtles. Qatna, Royal Palace, Room N; Late Bronze Age (sixteenth–fifteenth century BCE; find context fourteenth century BCE). Digital reconstruction by Constance von Rüden.

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The Late Bronze Age (ca. 1600–1200/1100 BCE)

The Late Bronze Age ushered in a period of expanded international relations stretching from Mesopotamia across the eastern Mediterranean (Liverani 2008, with references). For the first time, there is unequivocal textual evidence for direct contact between Egypt and Mesopotamian states—Assyria and Babylonia—through a diplomatic network knitted together by messengers bearing letters written on clay tablets in the lingua franca of Akkadian (Spar 2008, with references). Frequent correspondence also took place between the Mesopotamian states and Hatti in central Anatolia, which became one of the dominant powers of the time. In turn, Egypt and Hatti preserve written records of their relations with areas of the Aegean. Hatti in particular engaged in sustained interactions, both diplomatic and agonistic, with lands to its west, whose place names are amply recorded in the abundant texts found at the Hittite capital of Hattusa (modern Boğazköy). Correlating these ancient place names with known archaeological or historical sites has been a topic of intense scholarly debate, from which some consensus has emerged. For example, Millawanda is generally equated with Miletos, whose archaeological remains have confirmed this city’s close Aegean cultural ties during the Bronze Age (W.-D. Niemeier 2005). Likewise, the long-debated Hittite place name Ahhiyawa is now widely considered to refer to part (or all) of the Mycenaean Greek mainland (Beckman, Bryce, and Cline 2011: 1–6). A bronze longsword excavated at Hattusa bears an Akkadian inscription recording the victory of Tudhaliya I/II (ca. 1400 BCE) over the Assuwa-Country in western Anatolia, marking the weapon as booty from that region

(W.-D. Niemeier 2005: 18; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 292). Moreover, the sword itself is a variant of the traditional Mycenaean Type B sword.

Despite a greater interpenetration of the inland Near East with the eastern Mediterranean and western Anatolian interaction zones, a distance persisted between the cultural entities of these two zones, which is perhaps most evident in the distribution of the “cuneiform culture.” While large archives of cuneiform letters along with school texts for scribal training in Akkadian have been discovered at Amarna in Egypt and Hattusa in Anatolia, no Akkadian cuneiform texts have thus far appeared in western Anatolia, the Aegean, Greece, or even on Cyprus. These absences may be due to the serendipity of archaeology, since the recent petrographic analysis of cuneiform tablets written from the kingdom of Alashiya indicates that they were produced from clays found on Cyprus (Goren et al. 2004). Yet, with the possible exception of Cyprus, the gaps also correlate with patterns of interaction attested in earlier periods. Similar patterns of cultural interaction zones have been reconstructed on the basis of Late Bronze Age chariot-related artifacts and representations: they circumscribe zones of western Anatolia and the Aegean, on the one hand, and the southern Aegean, southern Anatolian coast, Cyprus, and the Levant, on the other (Feldman and Sauvage 2010: fig. 62).

As in earlier periods, western Anatolia bridged the Aegean region and central Anatolia/northern Mesopotamia (Mac Sweeney 2011); in contrast, the Levantine coast, especially the northern half, mediated the maritime eastern Mediterranean and inland Greater Mesopotamian areas. The political situation in the Aegean region probably affected the geographical patterns of these interactions. Around 1500/1450 BCE, a powerful mainland Mycenaean Greek presence on Crete accompanied the destruction of all the Minoan palaces except Knossos (Hallager 2010). With Crete incorporated into the mainland Mycenaean cultural and probably also political sphere came a renewed intensity of cultural connections with Anatolia, both along the northern inland route and the southern coastal route. A silver stag-shaped vessel with a spout on its back, associated with a Hittite-type ritual vessel (*bibru*) and made of Anatolian silver, was among the items buried in the Shaft Graves at Mycenae (ca. 1550 BCE) (Vermeule 1975: 15–16; Koehl 2008a: 270; Morris 2008: 436). On the Anatolian side, fragments of a bowl (ca. 1400 BCE) found at Hattusa depict an Aegean swordsman wearing an elaborate helmet with crest and flowing plume (W.-D. Niemeier 2005: 18–19; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 291). Finds from the Shaft Graves also exhibit strong ties to central and northern Europe (Vermeule 1975: 22–26; Hänsel 1988). These northerly ties may have been pursued at the expense of more southerly Mediterranean connections, helping account for what appears archaeologically to be an indirect Mycenaean presence in the Levant.

Indeed, direct contacts seem to have linked mainland Greece, southwestern

Anatolia, and Cyprus, while only indirect ties seem to connect these areas with the Levantine coast and inland. No individuals with Aegean names appear among the copious fourteenth- and thirteenth-century archives of diplomatic, administrative, and commercial records excavated at Ugarit, and only one documented Ugaritic merchant, Sinaranu, seems to have had ties to Crete (Yasur-Landau 2010a: 836). Sinaranu was granted a tax exemption for his cargo from Crete, perhaps as an incentive for the exceptional personal risks such unusual adventures incurred. By contrast, the almost constant references to Alashiyans, together with the presence of Cypriot pottery alongside imported Aegean wares, highlight the role of the Cypriots as middlemen between the Aegean and the Levant (Yasur-Landau 2010a: 836).

Cypriots seem not only to have directed Aegean pottery toward the Levant, but also facilitated the movement of Near Eastern items to the Aegean. This process is best illustrated by a group of thirty-five lapis lazuli seals found in a thirteenth-century hoard in a Mycenaean palace at Thebes in Boeotia (Porada 1981–82; Kopanias 2008; Feldman 2014a). The seals form a diverse collection representing different periods and places in the Near East. Precisely where they were assembled remains unknown, but since the group included four seals recut in Cyprus (Porada 1981–82: nos. 3, 7, 8, and 11) and an additional seven that appear to be entirely Cypriot products (Porada 1981–82: nos. 1, 2, 4–6, 9, and 10), the island is a likely candidate (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: 282). The seals are often interpreted as a diplomatic gift from a Near Eastern ruler (for example, Morris 2008: 438). Perhaps we should entertain the possibility that this ruler was the king of Alashiya, known from the international correspondence to have participated in the international diplomacy of the day (Goren et al. 2004).

The Uluburun shipwreck, which has also been thought to represent a diplomatic venture rather than a purely commercial enterprise, provides an idea of the route that the Theban seals might have taken: from Cyprus along the southern coast of Turkey to the Aegean islands, thence to the Greek mainland (Pulak 2008: 299). The ship, mentioned earlier for its massive cargo of copper and tin ingots, sank just off the cape of Uluburun, approximately halfway between Cyprus and the southern Aegean (Pulak 2008). Its westward trajectory following a counterclockwise direction of trade in the eastern Mediterranean has been reconstructed from the predominantly Near Eastern cargo on board (Pulak 2008: 297). In addition to the metal ingots, the ship carried Cypriot pottery, stored for export in at least three large jars. Although the “home port” of the Uluburun ship remains debated—recent studies propose a central Levantine origin (Pulak 2008: 299; Goren 2013)—the large quantities of both Cypriot copper and pottery indicate the island’s important role as a transshipment locale. A variety of luxury items and materials, among them glass ingots and unworked ivory, accompanied the Uluburun cargo, further highlighting the means by which these kinds of materials could have

reached the Aegean. In addition, such maritime ventures facilitated interactions between people of different cultural backgrounds, whether from the Aegean or the Near East. For example, analysis of personal effects presumably owned by passengers, such as seals and weapons, points to a mix of people from Levantine and Mycenaean cultural backgrounds (Pulak 2008: 300–2).

The Late Bronze Age cemetery at Müskebi near Bodrum on the Halikarnassos peninsula, not far from the Uluburun shipwreck (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: 381–85), provides another indication of the seamless cultural horizon stretching from the Aegean across the coastal areas of southwestern Anatolia. There, standard fourteenth-century Mycenaean-type chamber tombs display burial practices related to those attested on Aegean islands and the Greek mainland. The tombs contained Mycenaean pottery, weaponry, and jewelry, many paralleled by finds from the Uluburun shipwreck, suggesting the presence of a community on the southern coast of Turkey with close cultural ties to Mycenaean Greece.

Whatever the precise mechanisms and routes, the material remains from the regions of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East demonstrate an intensive level of cultural and artistic exchange during the Late Bronze Age. A so-called international style of the arts has been discussed in this connection. At first rather hazily defined to include almost any artistic object that exhibited evidence of multiple cultural associations (most notably, Smith 1965), specific internationalizing trends of the period are now coming into sharper focus. One particular set of artistic practices, in which generically “royal” motifs such as animal attacks and fantastical vegetation were hybridized to the point that no one cultural tradition predominated, aligns well with diplomatic practices of reciprocal gift-giving among the most powerful states of the Late Bronze Age (Feldman 2006). From the textual evidence, the Aegean world can be associated only loosely with the diplomacy recorded in letters such as those found at Amarna and Hattusa (Spar 2008; Beckman 1999; Hoffner 2009) through the occasional mention of Ahhiyawa in Hittite texts (Beckman, Bryce, and Cline 2011). Yet luxury items such as carved ivories, goldwork, and polychrome faience point to Aegean participation at some level in these spheres of interaction. For example, stylistic traits of incised ivories found at Megiddo in the Levant, at Kition on Cyprus, and on Delos in the Cyclades are so close that they suggest a common production origin (Feldman 2006: 95–97). While the Delos ivories derive from a secondary context dating to the first millennium, and thus were not necessarily in use during the Late Bronze Age (for example, Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 267), their stylistic association with carved relief ivories found at Mycenae and elsewhere on the Greek mainland (Feldman 2006: figs. 30–32), particularly evident in the three-lobed rendering of the lions’ ears, indicate their likely Aegean use in the Late Bronze Age.

At the same time, we see evidence for more one-off exchanges, which might be attributed to irregular or less systematic interactions between the Aegean and the Levant. The best known is a carved ivory pyxis lid found in a wealthy private tomb under a residence of the main port city of Ugarit, Minet el-Beida (Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008: no. 261) (Figure 23.3). Depicting a female flanked by two goats, the lid displays Aegeanizing features such as the incurved altar, split skirt, and tricurved arch pattern. Yet, as Helene J. Kantor (1947: 86–89) argued some time ago, as a whole the piece does not conform to the Aegean artistic tradition, in particular the figure's seated pose on the altar and bare breasts. Instead, the explicit and deliberate use of strongly Aegeanizing motifs seems to broadcast a connection with the Aegean world, albeit highly idiosyncratic, that would have been entirely appropriate to a merchant such as Sinaranu and his high-risk commercial ventures to Crete (Feldman 2015). This ivory's probable date in the thirteenth century signals an emerging element of entrepreneurial mercantilism, also seen in the twelfth-century shipwreck off Cape Gelidonya, just east of Uluburun (Bass 1967, 2013). The Cape Gelidonya ship, whose cargo consisted of large amounts of scrap metal, engaged in opportunistic trade or tramping, picking up and off-loading what cargo it could as it hopped from port to port around the eastern Mediterranean (Pulak 2008: 298).



Figure 23.3 Pyxis lid with female flanked by goats. Minet el-Beida, Tomb III; Late Bronze Age (thirteenth century BCE). Ivory; h. 13.7 cm. Musée du Louvre AO 11601.

Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Although they are artifactual remains of quite different scales and genres, the Minet el-Beida ivory lid and the Cape Gelidonya shipwreck both hint at changes on the horizon during the transition from the Bronze to Iron Age. Whatever the sequence of events, and they are much debated (Ward and Joukowsky 1992; Bachhuber and Roberts 2009), the final centuries of the second millennium present a picture not of a Dark Age, but of exploration and

opportunism. These activities were accompanied by the movement of large numbers of people, referred to in Egyptian texts as the Sea Peoples, many now linked to the Aegean, who resettled in different geographic locations around the eastern Mediterranean (Yasur-Landau [2010b](#)). From these widespread migrations during the early centuries of the first millennium came an expansion and intensification of maritime activity westward to the central and western Mediterranean, along with the rise of the major imperial power of Assyria based in northern Mesopotamia. The result was a new dynamic of interactions that in some ways perpetuated the long-established cultural interaction zones, yet in other ways profoundly reshaped the networks of cultural connections between the Aegean and Near East (Sherratt and Sherratt [1993](#); Gunter [2009](#); Feldman [2014b](#)).

Conclusions

Over the roughly two millennia of the Bronze Age, interactions between the ancient Near East and the Aegean point to complex, ongoing engagement among the diverse cultures that comprise these regions. Rather than any strict dichotomy between the two, fluctuating spheres of interaction emerge from a close study of the distribution patterns of shared artifactual assemblages. Metals, as raw material and worked goods, are particularly indicative of early, third-millennium contacts, while ceramic vessels constitute especially useful indicators of interaction in the second millennium BCE. In general, these interaction spheres follow either a northern, more land-based spread across Anatolia, or a southern, Mediterranean-based extent. For most of the Bronze Age, the inland areas of greater Mesopotamia appear to have limited connections with the Aegean that occur primarily via the northern sphere and from there along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Instead, Cyprus and the Levantine coast act as the primary intermediaries in relations with the Aegean. With the active involvement of Assyria and Babylonia in international relations of the eastern Mediterranean in the Late Bronze Age—a diplomatic sphere in which the Aegean appears to have played at least a peripheral role—more direct and closely knit interactions take place. These diplomatic relations laid the foundation for the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and the growth of extended long-distance maritime routes in the Mediterranean in the first millennium.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Two recent, well-illustrated scholarly exhibition catalogues examine interrelations across the Near East and eastern Mediterranean in the third and

second millennia BCE and offer excellent introductions to the subject (Aruz with Wallenfels 2003; Aruz, Benzel, and Evans 2008). Cline 2010 is an accessible, up-to-date handbook of Bronze Age Aegean archaeology with contributions by leading scholars. Updated bibliography for Crete can be found online in Chaniotis (2010–). Moran 1992 provides an engaging translation of diplomatic letters sent between rulers of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East during the Late Bronze Age. Van de Mieroop 2007 is a concise history of international relations in the eastern Mediterranean and Near East during the Late Bronze Age.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Near Eastern Art in the Iron Age Mediterranean

James Whitley

Introduction

The encounter between Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples and cultures in the Iron Age Mediterranean had effects still discernible today. Alphabetic scripts, figurative and narrative art styles, and forms of commensality and politics were some of the outcomes of this encounter whose origins and effects we can trace in the archaeological record. Of course, this encounter resulted in other borrowings, in literature and ideas as well as in art (see West [1997](#)). The debt that Homer and Hesiod owe to the Near East is profound, but also difficult to delineate and impossible to date.

The Iron Age was not the first time that peoples of the Aegean, or farther west, contacted and then borrowed extensively from the Near East. We cannot explain the emergence of Aegean (“Minoan” and “Mycenaean”) civilization in the Bronze Age without understanding the role played by long-distance exchange and other forms of cultural encounter. By the end of the Bronze Age, the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean were in constant contact. Trade flourished, and so did the flow of ideas and technologies from east to west (Whitley [2001](#): 102–33; Broodbank [2013](#): 345–444). But this connected eastern Mediterranean world, which encompassed the Aegean and whose tendrils also extended to Sicily, south Italy, and Sardinia, did not last. It came crashing down with the fall of the palaces in the Aegean and northern Syria around 1200 BCE (Broodbank [2013](#): 445–72). While some trade contacts with points farther west continued for another century or so, this palace/trade complex left no lasting legacy—except, perhaps, in song.

The same cannot be said for the Iron Age Mediterranean. By 500 BCE, a world created through a complex series of encounters between Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples extended from the Levantine coast to the Atlantic, from North Africa to the Black Sea and southern France (Aruz, Graff, and Rakic [2014](#)). Its tendrils extended beyond the Alps and to the banks of the Seine (Broodbank [2013](#): 506–84). The connected Mediterranean that emerged in the Iron Age was a durable one, linking Greeks, Phoenicians, Etruscans, Latins, Carians, Lycians, and other peoples in a tight mesh of trade and continuous cultural exchange. Its shared technologies—ironworking,

alphabetic scripts—and institutions—the city-centered and citizen-based state, the symposium (Nijboer 2013)—endured. Some still endure, while the Bronze Age palaces remain an anthropological and historical enigma.

Art clearly played a prominent role in this process of multiple and multiplying cultural entanglements in the Iron Age (roughly 1200–480 BCE).

“Orientalizing” is, after all, a term that can be applied equally to Archaic Greece and Early Iron Age Italy (Riva and Vella 2006). Is what we call “art” thus key to this process of “Mediterraneanization” (I. Morris 2003; cf. Broodbank 2013: 472–584)? And, if so, is it symptom or cause?

To put the question in this way is to beg several others. First, some might question the utility of the term “art,” and I might be one of them. Art is notoriously difficult to define. Even if we are ruthlessly pragmatic and, eschewing all forms of aesthetics and semiotics, define art as “objects that have historically been of interest to museums” or “things that scholars have previously termed art,” we still have some further defining to do. For Near Eastern art in Mediterranean contexts lies at the overlap of several regimes of value, both ancient (as in terms of distinct cultures) and modern (as in different traditions of scholarship, or scholarly paradigms). The broader difference between art history and archaeology need not concern us for now. Of more immediate importance are the different priorities of the classical and Near Eastern scholar.

The study of the ancient Near East, it seems to me, has been conducted by scholars who are comfortable with being both archaeologists and historians. Texts and material culture are simply treated as different kinds of evidence, and art is nothing special. The same is not true for the history and archaeology of the ancient Mediterranean. Following J. J. Winckelmann, classical archaeology has been principally concerned with art. But traditional classical archaeology, following the opinions of classical, principally Roman, authors, also strongly associates art’s quality with its ethnicity: Greek is best. The “Oriental” is thus something of an embarrassment, which explains why many classical archaeologists tend to pass rather quickly over the “Orientalizing.” Most experts acknowledge that Greek potters and painters would never independently have made the transition from the largely abstract Geometric art style to the richly figurative styles of black- and red-figure pottery without the example of Orientalizing metalwork, but they do not dwell on this fact. In his monumental history of Greek art, Martin Robertson (1975: 21–33) devoted precisely 12 out of a total of 611 pages to the “Orientalizing.” Robert Cook’s (1972: 41) explanation for the demise of the Geometric and the arrival of more figurative styles was even more succinct: “The growing exhaustion of the Geometric style . . . opened the way to new influences, and Oriental models were handy.” Since the early 1990s, some have reacted against this art historical insouciance. Sarah P. Morris (1992) claimed that Greek culture and art—and, by extension, the art and culture of the Iron Age Mediterranean as a

whole—are, both in origin and in essence, *Oriental*.

To reduce the problem to this play of essences—classical vs. Oriental, Western vs. Near Eastern—hardly advances the debate (see Gunter 2009, 2014). What such essentialism cannot explain is why the Iron Age “Orientalizing” period had so much greater a legacy than its Bronze Age predecessor. It is not the fact that Near Eastern metalwork and ivories appear in quantity in the eastern, central, and western Mediterranean that we have to describe. We have to take into account cultural filters and archaeological contexts, to see these relationships between things as, in certain ways, indicative of relationships between people. We have to take a contextual approach to these mutually beneficial material entanglements (*sensu* Hodder 2011).

In this chapter I concentrate on a few examples, aiming to demonstrate the diverse purposes to which Near Eastern ivories and metalwork were put by the peoples of the Mediterranean: first Crete, particularly the Idaean Cave sanctuary and the cemeteries of Knossos; within the Aegean world, Attica, Euboea, Corinthia, and the sanctuaries of Olympia and the Samian Heraion; in the West, Latium and southern Etruria. As we will see, the Mediterranean encounter with the Orient is not confined to the seventh century BCE.

Early Networks and the Cypriot Connection

The fall of the palaces at the end of the Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BCE) did not entail a complete cessation in the exchange of goods between the Levant, Cyprus, the Aegean, and the central Mediterranean. Even at the lowest point of the Greek “Dark Ages,” daggers and pins with small ivory inlays are found in Submycenaean and Protogeometric graves in Athens and Lefkandi (Lemos 2002: 21, 107, 120–26; Ruppenstein 2007: 236). The major surviving trans-Mediterranean link involved Cypriot bronzework. Although Cyprus is seldom considered part of the Near East it is certainly part of the Levant, and it produced metalwork that arguably formed an integral component of Near Eastern material culture, as the following quote should demonstrate.

He [Hiram of Tyre] made the ten stands of bronze; each stand was four cubits long, four cubits wide and three high. ... they had an undercarriage and crosspieces to the undercarriage. On the crosspieces of the undercarriage were lions and bulls and cherubs, and on top of the undercarriage was a support; ... Each stand had four bronze wheels with bronze axles.

(1 Kings 7.27–30; Jerusalem Bible translation)

As Hector Catling (1964: 222) first observed, this description of part of the

cult equipment of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem matches precisely the wheeled bronze four-sided stands apparently manufactured in Cyprus at the end of the Bronze Age (cf. Pappasavvas 2001: 27–42, 146–49). Such stands have been found in Levantine “religious” contexts, for example in the Philistine city of Ekron at the very beginning of the Iron Age (Tubb 2014: 41–42, fig. 1.16). The so-called Buccleuch stand vividly illustrates this group (Figure 24.1) (Pappasavvas 2001: 242–43, no. 28; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 28–29). Cypriot bronze four-sided stands (with or without wheels), tripods, and amphoroid craters appear in Crete, Euboea, Athens, Samos, and Umbria in contexts ranging in date from the late twelfth to the eighth century BCE (Vagnetti 1974). Perhaps these early Cypriot bronzeworkers were flattered by their imitators: one apparent workshop in Crete (Pappasavvas 2001: 158–202; Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013c: pls. 59–61) and another in Sardinia (Lo Schiavo et al. 1985; Pappasavvas 2001: 206–11). These imitations cannot result solely from objects traveling from east to west, but must have involved the transfer of technology. And when and where technology moves, so, too, do people.



Figure 24.1 Cypriot wheeled stand (the Buccleuch stand). Cyprus; Late Bronze Age, ca. 1200 BCE. Bronze; h. 21.29 cm (without wheels). British Museum Greek & Roman Antiquities 1946, 1017.1.

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The Cypriot bronze pieces present two curious features. First, they often appear in contexts far removed from both the place and time of their manufacture. The Cypriot tripod found in an eighth-century burial on the Pnyx in Athens is removed by four hundred years and some sixteen hundred kilometers from its place of manufacture.¹ It is not the oldest Near Eastern artifact found in Iron Age Greece: that distinction belongs to Babylonian gold jewelry accompanying the richly furnished female inhumation beneath the “heroon” in tenth-century Lefkandi (Popham 1994; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 33–37, fig. 1.13). Such antiques have been called “heirlooms” (Catling

1984; cf. Matthäus 1988), but it is highly unlikely that such objects were retained within the same family and in the same place over several generations, as the term implies. When Homeric poetry describes objects with a Near Eastern pedigree, such as the silver krater that Achilles sets as a prize for the funeral games of Patroclus (*Iliad* 23.740–49) or the krater that Menelaus gives to Telemachus (*Odyssey* 4.611–55), what is emphasized is precisely how frequently such antiques have changed hands between high-status males (“aristocrats”) who had no familial relationship with one another. The personal entanglements of such objects remind us of the situation in Polynesia and Melanesia: as objects change hands, they also change in status and meaning between different regimes of value (Thomas 1991; Whitley 2013b). In the archaeological record, such entangled objects find their best parallels in Cypriot bronze amphoroid craters that appear in contexts much later than the date of their manufacture, first in Crete (Tegou 2001) and then in Lefkandi (Popham, Calligas, and Sackett 1993).

The second curious feature is that while most of these objects, or at least the bronzes, were made in Cyprus, our literary sources—both Homer and the Book of Kings—attribute them not to Cyprus but to the cities of the Levantine coast, to Phoenicia. “Sidonians” made the silver kraters mentioned in Homer; Hiram of Tyre made the wheeled stands in Solomon’s temple. The consistent misattribution of Cypriot objects to the Phoenicians suggests that the Greeks had only a vague idea where such objects came from. It also indicates further the prestige, and ambiguous status, of “the Phoenicians” (Winter 1995). Perhaps in this early stereotype lies the origin of a certain kind of “Orientalism.”

Orientalia: Ivories, Bowls, and Cauldrons

Three classes of “Oriental” object, widely distributed across the Mediterranean in the Iron Age, have traditionally been seen as crucial to understanding the impact of Oriental art on Greeks, Etruscans, and other Mediterranean peoples: the so-called Nimrud ivories; the “Phoenician” bronze, silver, and gold bowls; and the tripod cauldrons with griffin or siren attachments. Of these, both the ivories and the Phoenician bowls have clear, identifiable origins in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Substantial quantities of both ivories (Barnett 1975: 15–29) and bowls (Markoe 1985: 16–18) have been recovered from the Assyrian capital Kalhu (Nimrud). Their stylistic classification has presented difficulties, as both groups seem to varying degrees to incorporate Egyptian (Figure 24.2) as well as North Syrian styles and motifs (Figure 24.3). The substantial quantities stored at Nimrud can be explained by Assyrian imperial mechanisms: they represent the products of many different workshops in the Levant and North Syria.² There is no

consensus, however, on the source of the “Phoenician” bowls. Some are genuinely Phoenician, in that they seem to have been produced in Tyre, Sidon, Berytus, or Kition on Cyprus; others belong stylistically to northern Syria. The term “Phoenician” is thus conventional, and does not necessarily imply any ethnic connotation (Winter 1995).



Figure 24.2 Furniture panel with sphinx, Phoenician style. Nimrud, Fort Shalmaneser; 900–700 BCE. Ivory; 6.9×7.75 cm. British Museum ME 134322.

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Figure 24.3 Mirror or fan handle with two nude females wearing polos, North Syrian style. Nimrud, Burnt Palace; 900–700 BCE. Ivory; 13.4×4.9 cm. British Museum ME 118102.

While no one questions the Near Eastern origins of either bowls or ivories (although some scholars attribute certain bowls to Cyprus), cauldrons with griffin protomes present a different picture. Prototypes have been sought in the Lake Van region of ancient Urartu, which has yielded cauldrons with bull protomes (Muscarella 1992; André-Salvini and Salvini 2014). Despite valiant efforts (Herrmann 1966: 30–89; 1979: 137–67; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 272–81), however, no clear antecedents for the cauldrons with griffin protomes have surfaced. Since the earliest known example comes from Tomb 79 in the Royal Tombs of Salamis on Cyprus (Karageorghis 1973: 97–108, no. 202; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 188–191), perhaps the earliest examples are in fact Cypriot and thus, ambiguously, both “Oriental” and “Greek.” Correlating styles and workshops with ethnic groups is fraught with difficulties (Gunter 2009: 80–103), especially in cases such as these, where the “hybridity” of the finished product seems to be part of the point. But the cauldron attachments seem to present an inherent difficulty in separating “Oriental” originals from their Greek “Orientalizing” copies (see Herrmann 1966: 30–89; 1979: 137–67; Muscarella 1992: 35–36). Yet scholars do agree that their production required some kind of Oriental inspiration. For current purposes I assume that the earliest examples are indeed in some sense “Oriental,” but that the vast majority were produced in Greece in a self-consciously “Orientalizing” style.

Each of these classes of objects has been considered essential to understanding the Orientalizing phenomenon both in the Aegean and in central Italy. The Phoenician bowls display a range of figurative (lions, griffins, sphinxes) and more decorative (palmettes, cables, guilloche) motifs that are intimately associated with “Orientalizing” developments. But the Orientalizing was not everywhere the same, nor did it have the same effects within the different contexts of Crete, central Greece, and central Italy. I compare how these objects were used in particular contexts, beginning with Crete and moving to central Greece, Olympia, and Samos, then to south Etruria and Latium. Different patterns clearly emerge, both in the use of the objects and the styles they inspired.

Oriental and Orientalizing Art in Crete: 900–600 BCE

Crete lies not far from the Levant, and it never really lost touch with Cyprus. According to H. Matthäus (1985) and G. Pappasavvas (2001: 158–59; 2012), from the tenth century BCE onward Crete was home to a workshop for elaborate bronze tripods and stands. The political communities of Crete seem

to have recovered from the Late Bronze Age catastrophe earlier than those of the mainland (Wallace 2010: 233–53). By the middle of the ninth century, there are signs of increased contact with northern Syria. At this time, “Nimrud” ivories begin to appear in the Idaean Cave sanctuary of Zeus (Kunze 1936; Barnett 1975: 44–45; Sakellarakis 1992; Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013b: 168–201; 2013c: pls. 95–112), and Phoenician bowls both here and in the cemeteries of Knossos, Arkades, and Eleutherna (Markoe 1985: 162–69; Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013b: 63–72; 2013c: 46–51; Stambolidis 2014). Perhaps building on the expertise of the earlier tripod workshop mentioned above, a group of smiths well acquainted with Near Eastern techniques, styles, and iconography had established itself in north central Crete. This workshop produced a distinctive range of metalwork bearing little obvious relation to earlier traditions, such as the Fortetsa bronze quiver (Brock 1957: 135–36, no. 1569) and the Khaniale Tekke gold pendant (Boardman 1967: 68, no. 2; cf. Boardman 1961: 136, fig. 51.B). John Boardman (1961: 129–42; 1967: 57–67) argued long ago that an immigrant family of skilled craftsmen from northern Syria produced these artifacts (cf. Brock 1957: 143). While this hypothesis has not always found favor (Hoffman 1997), I have always found it the most economical explanation for this sudden upsurge in “Orientalizing” metalwork.

The close proximity of such metalworkers to Knossian potters might also help explain the appearance of motifs such as running spirals and cables on the distinctive Protogeometric B Knossian pot style of the late ninth century (Brock 1957: 143; Whitley 2013a; Kotsonas 2013), perhaps Greece’s first clearly “Orientalizing” ceramic style (S. Morris 1997: 58). In Boardman’s view, this workshop was responsible for perhaps the most remarkable products of the Cretan Iron Age, the bronze shields or tympana (Kunze 1931) (Figure 24.4). Most have been found in the Idaean Cave and seem to have been made specifically as votives (Halbherr 1888; Matthäus 2000; Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013b: 34–60; 2013c: pls. 28–41). Their production began in the eighth and perhaps lasted into the seventh century BCE. Their iconography is elaborate, so elaborate that some must be understood as examples of narrative art. Yet, if so, we have no idea what stories they tell and whether those stories are Near Eastern or Cretan.



Figure 24.4 Drawing of decorated shield or tympanum (The Hunt Shield). Crete, Idaeon Cave, ca. 700 BCE. Bronze; dia. 83 cm. Heraklion Museum (X7).

After Emil Kunze, *Kretische Bronzereliefs* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1931), pl. 1 (redrawn by H. Mason). Courtesy of James Whitley.

But if the ninth-century beginning of Cretan Orientalizing is clear, its outcome is not quite what one might expect. To be sure, seventh-century Cretan painted pottery is elaborately polychrome, rich with such Oriental motifs as the cable and palmette (Moignard 1996). The Astarte terracotta figurines, mass-produced in molds found in sanctuary deposits at Gortyn (Cassimatis 1982), Praisos (Forster 1904), and Roussa Ekklesia (Erickson 2009), illustrate a more direct form of borrowing. They come in various forms: the nude female wearing a tall polos, the female holding a tympanum. The iconography of these figurines, if not their style, almost slavishly copies Eastern prototypes (Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: no. 99).

Thus described, Crete's precocious "Orientalizing" period (ca. 900–600 BCE) involved few imported objects of Levantine manufacture. It was Oriental

craftsmen who traveled, not Oriental art. There are two exceptions, however. First are the ivories recovered from the Idaean Cave, which come from a number of different workshops and cannot plausibly be reassembled to form a putative “throne of Zeus” (Pappalardo 2004). Second, multiple examples of “Phoenician” bronze bowls have been found in the cemeteries of Knossos (Brock 1957: no. 1559), Eleutherna, and Afrati, in mostly seventh-century contexts (Pappalardo 2013). These bowls are perhaps the most sensitive index of the various ways in which different peoples of the Mediterranean responded to Near Eastern art, and in Crete most appear in the Idaean Cave. This pattern of deposition is later replicated on the Greek mainland and in Ionia, at sites such as Olympia and the Samian Heraion. But let us first look at the mainland in the Early Iron Age.

Oriental Art in Early Iron Age of Greece: The Cemeteries of Athens and Lefkandi (Euboia)

For the tenth and ninth centuries BCE in the region Ian Morris (1998) calls “central Greece,” our best evidence comes from cemeteries. Those of Athens and Lefkandi have been the most extensively studied. The most spectacular finds are two antiques that appear in the male cremation and female inhumation underneath the “heroon” at Lefkandi, Toumba: a Cypriot bronze amphoroid krater (Catling 1993) and a Babylonian gold necklace (Popham 1994; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 33–37, fig. 1.13). As noted above, they must have been over one hundred and five hundred years old, respectively, when they were deposited around 950 BCE (Whitley 2002; 2013b).

Not all such objects are necessarily antiques, however. Neither the gold earrings found in the grave of a rich Athenian lady, made with “Oriental” techniques of granulation and filigree (Smithson 1968: 113–15), nor the Near Eastern bronze bowl used to seal the lid of the neck-handled amphora from Kerameikos grave G42 (Kübler 1954: 201–3; Markoe 1985: 203, G1) need have been antiques when deposited around 850 BCE. The same is true of the two Near Eastern bowls that appear in two graves in the Toumba cemetery of Lefkandi (Popham 1995; Popham and Lemos 1996: pls. 133, 144, T.55; Popham and Lemos 1996: pls. 134, 145, T.70). It is in the same narrow circle of “aristocratic” graves in Athens that ivories again appear after a gap of two hundred years (Smithson 1968: 116, nos. 80, 81; Kübler 1954: 236, G41). As with Knossos, it is possible—indeed, likely—that immigrant Oriental craftsmen newly resident in Athens produced the goldwork found in these graves. It is difficult otherwise to explain how the technology had traveled.

If so, by the eighth century, the situation in Athens had changed. The gold bands or diadems recovered from several aristocratic Athenian graves in the

Dipylon cemetery on Piraeus Street are decorated both with geometric maeanders and Oriental animal friezes (Ohly 1953).³ Some scholars, notably J. N. Coldstream, have detected a degree of “Hellenization” both in the gold bands and in the small ivory sculptures of young girls found in Dipylon grave 13 (Brückner and Pernice 1893; Braun-Holzinger and Rehm 2005: 142–43). Like the Cretan terracottas, these five figures are clearly derived from Near Eastern prototypes, sometimes referred to as “Astarte” figurines (see Figure 24.3) (also Barnett 1975: 208 S.226, pl. LVII; compare Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 143, fig. 3.27). The Athenian ivories were apparently carved from a single elephant tusk. Unlike Cretan terracottas, however, they differ markedly from Near Eastern female nudes, and not only because a maeander adorns their high polos. As Coldstream (2003: 130) wrote, their Athenian carver “drastically pared down the voluptuous flesh of his plump prototypes” such that the largest example can be seen as “the spiritual ancestor of the Archaic marble maidens who attended Athena by her temples on the Acropolis” (2003: 132).

Such an interpretation fits the older narrative of “Hellenization” with which I began this essay. Even if we are now justifiably suspicious of such metanarratives, there are marked differences between eighth-century Knossos and eighth-century Athens both in the manner and the degree to which they adapted various forms of Levantine prototypes. In general, Cretan “Astarte” figurines are difficult to differentiate from Near Eastern examples. Craftsmen based in and around Athens, however, were already clearly distinguishing their work from Oriental originals, blending local (Geometric) and Levantine (figurative) features in both gold- and ivory-work. At the same time, the beginnings of animal friezes appear on Late Geometric I funerary vessels fashioned by the Dipylon Master and his workshop (Coldstream 2003: 113).

These considerations lead us into the broader question of “Orientalization” (Whitley 2013a), a topic that lies beyond this chapter’s scope. Perhaps the material—particularly gold and ivory—retained Oriental connotations even when the object’s design incorporated local elements, an example of “hybridity.” In any case, eighth-century Athenians had not quite given up on entangled objects with a Near Eastern pedigree: in the Pnyx tomb, a twelfth-century Cypriot bronze tripod supported a cremation in an eighth-century bronze cauldron (Brückner 1893).

A New Context: The Great Sanctuaries of Olympia and Samos (Heraion)

The bronze stand in the Pnyx grave is one of the last of its kind. By the end of

the eighth century, valuable bronze and other entangled objects generally were no longer deposited in (mostly single) graves. Instead, in growing numbers they turn up in sanctuaries as gifts to the gods. Thus the Phoenician bronze bowls that had earlier appeared in graves in Lefkandi and Athens are now found in major sanctuaries: on the Athenian Acropolis, and at Delphi, Perachora, and Olympia.⁴ From about 700 BCE onward, the sanctuaries of Zeus at Olympia and Hera on Samos became the principal places where “Oriental” bronze cauldrons with stands and griffin protomes were deposited (Herrmann 1979; Strøm 1992). These griffin protomes (Figure 24.5) remain at the center of a debate about what is genuinely or apparently Oriental—between the Orient and the Orientalizing (Mattusch 1990; Gunter 2009: 104–7; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 272–81).



Figure 24.5 Griffin protome. Olympia; ca. 700–650 BCE. Bronze; h. 35.8 cm. No. B945. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

Little attention has been given to the precise context of such exotic bronze finds. The protome illustrated in [Figure 24.5](#), for example, has no more

precise findspot than the fill of the third South Wall of the third stadium at Olympia (Kunze and Schleif 1941: 28; Herrmann 1979: 38). Its date of just before 600 BCE is stylistic rather than stratigraphic. The publication of at least four Oriental bronze vessels from Olympia reworked as *sphyrelata* statues, however, sheds light on their “object biography” (Borell and Rittig 1998: 5–62). The original vessels seem to be Babylonian, manufactured in the eighth or seventh century BCE. They show various stereotypically “Oriental” scenes, all in high relief: men in procession with bulls, winged sphinxes with flanking trees (Figure 24.6). At some point these vessels were apparently reworked using the “*sphyrelata*” technique to form bronze statues. They were found in well 17 by the North Wall of the third stadium along with many much later artifacts, including an inscribed shield fragment from the Argive trophy, two greaves, a Corinthian helmet, and several plain cups (Borell and Rittig 1998: 208–11). The context suggests a date around 475 BCE, and we must imagine that the reused vessels were deposited as part of a clearing-out operation of earlier votives prior to constructing the second stadium. By the time of their final deposition the objects clearly were antiques, but in no sense *pristine* antiques.



Figure 24.6 Near Eastern sheetmetal vessels decorated with antithetical sphinxes, reused as *sphyrelata* statues. Olympia (composite of Olympia B5040, B5859, B5885, B5047). Bronze; max. h. 33.6 cm.

Photo: Gösta Hellner. DAI neg. no. D-DAI-ATH-1979/573. Courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Athen.

The precise significance of this reworking is difficult for us to reconstruct. But it is striking how much longer Oriental objects were in circulation before their

final deposition, in contrast to many Greek ones. The shield inscribed “the Argives set this up to Zeus taking it from the Corinthians,” for example, part of the largest known trophy from late Archaic times, dates to just before 500 BCE (Jackson 2000). It is also striking how many Oriental objects were inscribed. At least two bronze Phoenician bowls are inscribed, one in Phoenician (Markoe 1985: 206, G6) and one in Aramaic (Figure 24.7) (Furtwängler 1890: 140; Markoe 1985: 204–5, G3).



Figure 24.7 “Phoenician” bowl with Aramaic inscription. Olympia; late eighth–early seventh century BCE. Bronze; 3.1 × dia. 20.4 cm. Athens, National Museum 7941.

Image © National Archaeological Museum, Hellenic Ministry of Culture & Sports, Archaeological Receipts Fund. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art / Art Resource, NY.

Inscribed Oriental antiques of this kind are also found in at least one other major sanctuary that had an international significance in the Archaic period: the Heraion on Samos (Gunter 2009: 124–28, 142–54; Niemeier 2014). The Heraion received objects from all over the eastern Mediterranean, including a Cypriot tripod (Pappasavvas 2001: 238, no. 18), and from as far afield as Babylonia (Kyrieleis 1979), along with several Nimrud ivories (Barnett 1948: 3 n.17 and pl. I fig A; Barnett 1975: 138; cf. Brize 1992). Objects that mirror the shapes of some of the ivories also appear (Barnett 1975: 101–3, S146–48).

A North Syrian bronze horse frontlet, or nosepiece, bears an Aramaic inscription: “What [the god] Hadad has given to Lord Hazael from Umqi in the year when the Lord crossed the river” (Kyrieleis and Röllig 1988; cf. Jantzen 1972: 58–59; Niemeier 2014: 296–97, no. 165; Braun-Holzinger and Rehm 2005: 33, no. 16). The object’s inscription and style date it firmly to the ninth century BCE, but it occurs in a clearly sixth-century stratum. Two North Syrian bronzes, also in shapes that echo equestrian blinker ornaments found among the Nimrud ivories (Barnett 1975: 237, Suppl. 50 and 51), have also appeared in contexts dating no earlier than the eighth century BCE: one on Samos (Braun-Holzinger and Rehm 2005: 29, no. 1); and another (bearing an Aramaic inscription) at the sanctuary of Apollo Daphnephoros in Eretria on Euboia (Charbonnet 1986; Kyrieleis and Röllig 1988: 69–71; Braun-Holzinger and Rehm 2005: 30, no. 4; Niemeier 2014: 297, no. 166).

Such highly entangled objects thus maintained a special significance for Greeks down to the end of the Archaic period, and even later. To be sure, these artifacts were valued in part because they were skilled works made from precious materials. But they were also valued because they were old and exotic—that is, because of their cumulative associations within the Early Iron Age eastern Mediterranean interaction sphere. What is distinctive about the Aegean picture in the Archaic period is that such entangled objects were largely considered gifts appropriate only for gods, not for men. A different situation prevailed farther west.

Near Eastern Art in Latium and South Etruria

In Umbria in central Italy, fragments of Cypriot tripods have been found in the hoards at Contigliano and Piedeluco (Lo Schiavo et al. 1985: 40–42; Matthäus 1985: 306, n, o, and p; cf. Pappasavvas 2001: 233, no. 2). These fragments must have been antiques when they were deposited around 900 BCE (Vagnetti 1974; Lo Schiavo et al. 1985: 40–42). Few imports from the eastern Mediterranean date between the time of these hoards and the striking import horizon that took place in Latium and south Etruria during the “Orientalizing” period.

At least superficially, the Orientalizing period in Latium and southern Etruria, broadly the seventh century BCE (Riva 2010), strikingly resembles what had taken place in the Aegean world around 700 BCE. The same kinds of objects appear in both places: cauldrons with griffin protomes, ivories, and Phoenician silver bowls (Vella 2010). Like many examples found in the Aegean, many are inscribed, such as an example from the Bernardini Tomb (Markoe 1985: 188–90, E1). But in one key respect the situation is different. Whereas by the seventh century in the Aegean most if not all such objects become gifts to the gods, in Etruria and in Latium they continue to form part of the assemblages

of “princely graves.”

These “princely graves” are truly spectacular. The Regolini-Galassi Tomb from Caere (Cerveteri) in southern Etruria contained a bronze throne, couch, and four-wheeled cart, and it references the “Eastern banquet” in many of its other finds (Riva 2010: 143–44, 151–52; Sannibale 2008, 2014). It also yielded four silver-gilt Phoenician bowls (Markoe 1985: 194–99, E6–E9). But it is the two “princely” tombs from Praeneste (Palestrina) in Latium that really stand out. Both the Bernardini (Curtis 1919) and Barberini (Curtis 1925) tombs, dating to the seventh century, are stuffed with nearly one hundred objects made of gold, silver, bronze, amber, and ivory, along with imported Protocorinthian drinking vessels and iron firedogs associated with feasting. Both tombs thus contain assemblages related to banqueting, with specifically Oriental connotations (Riva 2010: 142–46). The Bernardini Tomb contains four Phoenician silver bowls (Markoe 1985: 188–93, E1–4; Curtis 1919: 33–45, nos. 23–26). At least some of the numerous ivories carved in openwork relief belong to the “Nimrud” category (Barnett 1975: 129; Curtis 1919: 54–64). Although the Barberini Tomb produced only one Phoenician silver bowl (Markoe 1985: 193–94, E5; Curtis 1925: 22–23, no. 20), it equals the other tomb in the quantity and range of objects made from exotic or precious materials. In addition, both tombs contain examples of “Oriental” or “Orientalizing” cauldrons with griffin protomes (Curtis 1919: 72–75, no. 75; Curtis 1925: 44–45, nos. 80–81; see Herrmann 1979: 137–67).

Both tombs also produced examples of Orientalizing work: local adaptations of designs or objects from the Near East. The Bernardini Tomb’s locally made large bronze shield (Curtis 1919: 77–79) derives from a well-established tradition of Villanovan bronzework. But its figured scenes and cable ornament suggest a desire to incorporate the Eastern and exotic. Much the same could be said of the elaborate bronze seat from the Barberini Tomb (Curtis 1925: 46, no. 82). The most spectacular such Orientalizing transformation is the gold pectoral from the Regolini-Galassi Tomb (Figure 24.8). Its decoration incorporates multiple rows of winged griffins derived from Oriental imports, both in ivory and silver; its shape recalls Egyptian rather than Levantine antecedents in their multiple rows that also echo Villanovan metalwork (Sannibale 2008: 356–58, 354–55, fig. 25; 2014: 316, fig. 4.27). Curiously, at least from an Aegean perspective, local craftsmen here tended to “trade up” rather than “trade down” when adapting these designs and objects to local materials. Whereas a Greek craftsman around 700 BCE, faced with a Phoenician bowl, might attempt to reproduce in clay and paint the effect of an embossed and incised bronze original (Borell 1978), the Italian craftsman faced with a ceramic Greek drinking vessel decided to replicate its effects in silver and gold (Curtis 1925: nos. 13–14). It may seem odd to mix Greek and Oriental, but in seventh-century Italy Orientalization—copying the Near East—and Hellenization—copying the Aegean—were two indistinguishable

processes. They both form part of “Mediterraneanization” (I. Morris [2003](#)).



Figure 24.8 Decorated pectoral. Cerveteri (Caere), Regolini-Galassi Tomb; ca. 675–650 BCE. Gold; 42×38.1 cm. Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco 20553.

Photo Vatican Museums.

In modern terms, both the Greek adaptation of Near Eastern material culture and the Italian (Latin/Etruscan) adoption of both Greek and Oriental material would count as “hybridity” (Van Dommelen [2006](#))—a term that precisely fails to grasp what is happening here, because it fails to explain the very different ways in which the inhabitants of central Greece and central Italy responded to what the Near East had to offer.

Summary and Conclusions

For comparative purposes I summarize in tabular form, by area, the types of Oriental objects found—Cypriot bronzes, Phoenician bowls, Nimrud ivories and griffin cauldrons—and their contexts of deposition. *Note:* These figures were compiled before the recent publication of the Idaean Cave sanctuary (Sakellarakis and Sapouna-Sakellarakis 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). They may have to be revised, probably upward, in the case of that cave.

Cypriot bronze amphoroid kraters, tripods, and four-sided stands appear in all kinds of contexts (Table 24.1). Given the small numbers, no real pattern of deposition can be discerned, apart from the general Aegean shift from graves to sanctuaries. But two facts should be emphasized. The first concerns the extent of their distribution: the Cypriot network embraces central Italy and Sardinia as well as the Aegean. Second, almost all of them must have been antiques—not heirlooms—at the time they were finally deposited (Whitley 2013b).

Table 24.1 Cypriot bronze amphoroid kraters, tripods, and four-sided stands

	11th century	10th century	9th century	8th century	Total
Lefkandi cemeteries	0	1	0	0	1
Athens cemeteries	0	0	0	1	1
Knossos cemeteries	1	0	0	0	1
Samian Heraion sanctuary	0	0	0	1	1
Central Italy Umbrian hoards	0	0	2	0	2

Since “Phoenician” bowls are difficult to date, it is more challenging to determine whether these examples were antiques when finally deposited (Table 24.2). Again, the only pattern in the Aegean is the general shift from grave to sanctuary. More strikingly, however, the objects deposited in Italy are almost all made of silver, whereas those in the Aegean are all made of bronze.

Table 24.2 Phoenician bronze and silver bowls

	9th century	8th century	7th century	Total
Athens	1 bronze	0	0	1

cemeteries				
Lefkandi cemeteries	2 bronze	0	0	2
Olympia sanctuary	0	2 bronze	1 bronze	3
Knossos cemetery	0	0	1 bronze	1 bronze
Idaeon Cave sanctuary	0	5 bronze	5 bronze	10 bronze
Praeneste and Cerveteri tombs	0	0	9 silver	9 silver

Again, for the Nimrud ivories, little can be inferred (Table 24.3). Nimrud ivories do not turn up in graves in the Early Iron Age Aegean; the ivories that do appear, as in the Dipylon graves in Athens, seem to be locally made even if their origins, both in technique and iconography, can be traced farther east. Strikingly, however, the same types of objects deposited in the seventh century as votives in the great sanctuaries of Samos and the Idaeon Cave appear as grave goods in central Italy.

Table 24.3 Nimrud ivories

	10th century	9th century	8th century	7th century	Total
Lefkandi cemeteries	0	0	0	0	0
Athens cemeteries	0	0	0	0	0
Knossos cemeteries	0	0	0	0	0
Idaeon Cave sanctuary	0	?	17	17	34
Samian Heraion sanctuary	0	0	0	3?	3
Praeneste tombs	0	0	0	20?	20

The griffin protomes, ambiguously both/either Oriental and/or Orientalizing, exhibit a similar distribution (Table 24.4). They occur in large numbers in the great sanctuaries of the Aegean. In central Italy they are fewer, but they are the only such cauldrons we have, and all come from rich tombs.

Table 24.4 Griffin protomes, late eighth to early sixth century

	Early (late 8th	Middle (mid-	Late (late 7th	Total
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	<i>to early 7th century)</i>	<i>7th century)</i>	<i>to early 6th century)</i>	
Olympia sanctuary	16	37	54	107
Samian Heraion sanctuary	16	24	150	190
Praeneste tombs	0	2	1	3

By the seventh century, thus, marked differences exist between the depositional practices of various communities across the Iron Age Mediterranean. Latins and Etruscans placed their most valuable Oriental objects in graves; there are no substantial votive deposits at this time in either Latium or south Etruria. By 650 BCE in the Aegean, however, sanctuaries had become the primary locus for depositing exotically entangled and Orientalizing objects. According to Nassos Papalexandrou (forthcoming; cf. Papalexandrou 2005), Oriental objects in general, and cauldrons with griffin protomes in particular, turned the seventh-century Greek sanctuary into a kind of Wunderkammer, a treasure house of wonders for the visitor. But if so, it is odd that these votives are overwhelmingly bronze, not silver: no Greek sanctuary rivals the wealth of gold, silver, and ivory objects deposited in tombs in Praeneste or Cerveteri. Yet these differences do not represent straightforward differences between Italians and Greeks, or “East” and “West,” for the pattern of deposition in central Italy also occurs in the Greek-speaking areas of Cyprus. Two tombs from the Royal Cemetery of Salamis each yielded at least one Phoenician silver bowl, ivories, and the earliest dated tripod cauldron with griffin protomes: Tombs 2 (Karageorghis 1967: 6–24) and 79 (Karageorghis 1973: 4–122). They also contain chariots, which became a major component of funerary equipment in Italy in the seventh century (Riva 2010: 72–107, 141–76).

Also noteworthy is where these Oriental artifacts do *not* turn up. No “Phoenician” bronze or silver bowl, Nimrud ivory, or griffin protome has been found in the areas of Phoenician settlement in North Africa, southern Spain, or Sardinia (Markoe 1985; 1992: 64–67; Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 211–42). To be sure, there are some engraved ivories, but nothing of the quality we find in Italy, Crete, or the great sanctuaries of Greece. Apart from some exquisite goldwork from Carambolo (Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 222–24), a concentration in Spain of metal jugs with palmette-handled termination (Markoe 1992: 65, fig. 6), and some fine bronze ewers (Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014: 225–26), there is very little in the far west of the Mediterranean that could be counted as “Phoenician art.” This situation is especially curious in the case of Sardinia, which had long-established contacts with Cyprus and was home to at least one workshop that produced tripods modeled on Cypriot

prototypes. The “hybridity” (Van Dommelen 2006) that scholars have sought to find in recently excavated Sardinian settlements had few or no consequences for the history of art.

Art may not be the point, however. Many of the objects discussed here were antiques at the time of their deposition. Between their manufacture on Cyprus or in the Levant and their final resting place in the Aegean or central Italy, they had acquired histories and entanglements. Many are inscribed in Phoenician or Aramaic, like the horse frontlet from the Samian Heraion and several bronze and silver bowls from Italy and Greece (Markoe 1985: 72–74). At least one plain hemispherical bowl from Teke tomb J near Knossos is similarly inscribed (Coldstream and Catling 1996: 30 Jf1; Catling 1996: 563–64). Plain hemispherical bowls like these, which occur in ninth-century contexts elsewhere at Knossos (Catling 1996: 563) and in the Kerameikos cemetery in Athens (Kübler 1954: 214–61, graves G1, G7, G13, G38 and G74), were almost certainly manufactured in Cyprus or the Levant (Matthäus 1985). Such plain, undecorated objects are not usually considered to be art. But the inscribed bowl from Teke deserves equally to be considered an “entangled object” as any more elaborately crafted artifact, having crossed the cultural border between the Semitic- and Greek-speaking worlds. As the anthropologist Janet Hoskins (1998) has observed, it may not be the most elaborately or highly crafted objects that are the most important in people’s lives, nor art that is most significant in understanding the multiple and multiplying entanglements that forever transformed the Mediterranean between 1000 and 500 BCE.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

No single book treats the Iron Age Mediterranean as a whole, but see Broodbank 2013 (chs. 9–10), which builds on I. Morris 2003. Riva and Vella 2006 provide a range of views on “Orientalization,” a debate whose origins are best sought in Burkert 1992 and S. Morris 1992. A Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue (Aruz, Graff, and Rakic 2014) offers a vivid impression of the kinds of objects exchanged and where they ended up; Gunter 2009 provides a closer focus on Orientalia in the Aegean. For a countervailing, contextual perspective on this issue, see Whitley 2001: 102–33.

Whitley 2013b discusses some of the more modern concepts now in use—agency, object biography, personhood, material entanglements—in relation to selected material from the earlier part of the Iron Age.

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NOTES

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1. Athens National Museum 7940: Brückner 1893; cf. Pappasavvas 2001: 235, no. 9.
2. Pappalardo (2004, 2013) has now identified four such ivory workshops; see now Feldman 2014.
3. Found both in grave 5 in the Dipylon cemetery (Brückner and Pernice 1893) and in Kerameikos graves G 50 and G72 (Kübler 1954: 245, 261).
4. Examples include one from the Athenian Acropolis (Markoe 1985: 203–4, G2), one from Delphi (Markoe 1985: 205–6, G4), one from Perachora (Markoe 1985: 209, G11), and several from Olympia (Markoe 1985: 206–7, G3, G5, G6, G7).

PART V
INTERSECTIONS WITH
ARCHAEOLOGY, COLLECTING, AND
CULTURAL HERITAGE

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Archaeology and the Art of the Ancient Near East

D. T. Potts

Introduction

The realization that civilizations of great antiquity existed in the distant past was made thousands of years ago. The Sumerian scribes who compiled the so-called Sumerian King List at Ur during the reign of Shulgi (2094–2047 BCE) knew the names and sequence of dynasties that they believed had reigned thousands of years earlier, ever since “kingship was sent down from heaven” (Cooper 2010: 330; George 2011: 200–5). Greek authors like Herodotus, active in the late fifth century BCE, followed several decades later by Ctesias, wrote surveys of early Assyrian, Median and Persian history (Henkelman et al. 2011; Marquart 1891–93; Lanfranchi 2011; Rollinger 2011). And the Bible, of course, provides a wealth of information on some, though by no means all, of the societies that inhabited the Near East in periods before the authors of its various books lived. Europeans who visited the Near East in medieval or early modern times were often well versed in these sources. Many visited ancient sites, some famous, like Babylon and Nineveh, and some previously undocumented by a European. Such travelers purchased portable antiquities, and in this way hundreds, if not thousands, of ancient Near Eastern “trinkets”—usually beads and seals made of semiprecious stones, as well as coins—found their way into private collections and royal cabinets of curiosities. More enterprising European travelers made drawings and plans of standing monuments, such as those of Persepolis, that were published as engravings in their travel accounts and illustrated what could be observed even without excavation. By the mid-nineteenth century, photography was deployed for the same purpose.

Thus, long before the first archaeological excavations were undertaken during the 1840s and 1850s in the Ottoman and Qajar Empires (Chevalier 2012), European students of ancient Near Eastern art had access to a considerable body of evidence, which in the full flowering of the European Enlightenment became an object of serious study, as it has subsequently. Moreover, from the beginning we can see two diverging lines of inquiry at work. On the one hand, scholars like Silvestre de Sacy (1793: 15–124) used the available “proto-archaeological” documentation (engravings, often inaccurate; verbal

descriptions) on the important monuments, such as the Sasanian reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam published in 1711 by Cornelis de Bruin, to address issues of chronology, iconography, meaning, and significance, much as any scholar would today. On the other hand, scholars across Europe began to study the mass of unprovenanced objects, principally cylinder seals, which had found their way into European collections. Like their colleagues in botany, entomology, palaeontology, and other scientific disciplines, they exchanged information—casts, engravings of seal impressions, and written descriptions (Ménant 1883: 24). What began modestly as a trickle of studies dealing with only a few cylinder seals (e.g., Dorow 1820) grew into publications of larger collections (e.g., Cullimore 1842), culminating by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in detailed catalogues (e.g., Ménant 1887; Ward 1910).

This activity, it must be remembered, was taking place against the backdrop of a rapid growth in scholarship on Babylonia and Assyria that was facilitated by the decipherment of cuneiform and the expansion of Assyriology as a discipline in European and American universities (Lyon 1896). Moreover, from 1842, when Paul-Émile Botta first undertook investigations at Nineveh, a mass of excavated material from the Near East began to enter the Louvre and the British Museum, followed by the Imperial Ottoman Museum in Istanbul, the Vorderasiatisches (Pergamon) Museum in Berlin, and the University Museum in Philadelphia (Chevalier 2012). This phase of exploration, which lasted until World War I and witnessed the rediscovery of the completely unknown Sumerian civilization and the scarcely known Hittites (Hilprecht 1896; Ward 1896), revolutionized Western understanding of the ancient Near East. The corpus of ancient art available for study grew exponentially. Before the century was out, the monumental volumes of Georges Perrot and Charles Chipiez covering the art and architecture of Babylonia (Chaldaea), and Assyria (1884); Phoenicia (1885); Judaea, Syria, and Asia Minor (1887); and Phrygia, Lydia, Caria, and Lycia (1890), had firmly established ancient Near Eastern art history alongside the better-known fields of Egyptology and classical art and archaeology.

While the quantity and diversity of ancient Near Eastern art have increased dramatically since the late nineteenth century, most of the issues that concern us today were already evident in the earliest manifestations of art historical scholarship treating this region. From the outset, for example, the study of ancient Near Eastern art has had to contend with both excavated material—finds from known excavations—and “unexcavated” (unprovenanced) material, finds whose source or place of origin is unknown. Into this mix we may throw two additional categories of material: forgeries, which from an early date have plagued the study of ancient Near Eastern art (see Clermont-Ganneau 1885; Ménant 1887); and finds from illicit excavations that entered collections through the art market. Objects in the latter group may be

completely without provenance; attributed to a region, such as “Luristan” or “Amlash”; or attributed to a named site. In most cases such attributions are utterly untrustworthy and have been invented simply to please potential buyers or increase prices. My discussion will largely ignore material from these latter two categories, concentrating instead on ancient Near Eastern art found in archaeological contexts. It is important to stress, however, that even when contexts are known, the relationship between archaeological contexts and the objects found in them is not always straightforward. A number of examples will illustrate this point.

Stratigraphy and Provenance

Critics of the art market and those opposed to studying clandestinely excavated objects have long been at pains to educate the broader public about the importance of context. Even if the provenance of an object acquired on the art market is known, an uncontrolled excavation will have destroyed a great deal of contextual information, much of it potentially crucial in appreciating and understanding an object. Those who excavate illegally in order to acquire objects to sell on the art market do not normally keep records of the archaeological deposits they have exposed, that is, the *stratigraphy* of the site they have looted, to use the term borrowed from geology that has been current in archaeological research since Sir Charles Lyell published his *Principles of Geology* (1830–33). To the extent that many sites are multilayered, due to occupation over successive periods, the stratigraphy of the accumulated deposits is the only record of the site’s formation, and the position of a find within the stratigraphic sequence is therefore important. Through careful observation of an object’s relationship to the stratigraphy of a site, for example, it is possible, via a series of analytical steps, to date the context and by association, in many cases, the objects found in it. Charcoal from a stratum may be dated using the now standard and relatively inexpensive radiocarbon method, which should provide a date for the objects found in that stratum. Yet there are many reasons why this is not true in all cases.

Some of these reasons are purely mechanical. Like human existence, stratigraphy is rarely “neat.” Disturbed contexts and broken stratigraphy are the norm, not a pristine, “layer cake” of successive deposits, one above the other, each of which, moving downward from the surface of the site, is older than the one preceding it. For example, fill (earth and stones) may be dug out of older deposits on a site and brought to a place where a new house is being built, perhaps to level off an uneven bit of ground. The mere act of putting a spade or shovel into the ground and digging will cut into chronologically earlier strata, that is, deposits pre-dating the digger’s lifetime. Or mudbricks may be made with earth dug from deeper (older) deposits on a site, or even

recycled from older buildings, as documented at Tello in Iraq, where inscribed bricks from the late third millennium BCE were used in a palace of the second century BCE (Oelsner 1986: 99). In both cases, the soil spread over the surface to level an area before building a house, or the bricks used to construct a house, may contain artifacts that are hundreds or even thousands of years older than the period in which the house was built. These artifacts will therefore be found alongside much more recent material when such a deposit is excavated. Such finds are labeled “residual,” but if one works in an area that is poorly known, where the material culture has not previously been studied, it can be very difficult, or even impossible, to distinguish the residual finds from those that actually “belong” where they were found. A radiocarbon determination provides a date for the use of a given stratum: that is, it dates the period when people walked on a surface, lived in a house, threw their trash out the door, and so forth. It does not directly date the artifacts found within the fill on which the house was built or the bricks from which the house was made (cf. Delougaz and Lloyd 1942: 4).

In the case of prestige objects, or works of art, other issues also need to be considered. Even if stylistic or iconographic analysis suggests that an object was manufactured in or near the place where it was found, this indication provides no guarantee that it can be dated by the stratum or context in which it was recovered. Prestige objects were often retained for many years, sometimes centuries or even millennia. This is certainly true of anthropomorphic statuary dating to the third and early second millennia BCE in Mesopotamia (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011; Evans 2012), most of which was displayed in temples for the purpose of engaging in perpetual prayer for the deceased in whose memory the object was dedicated. We know something of the longevity of such statuary thanks to cuneiform texts recording offerings for them, sometimes centuries after the lifetime of the individual being commemorated. The scribe Dudu, for example, who lived around 2450 BCE, was still venerated three centuries later (Potts 1997: 228). In this case, a specific religious practice explains the fact that a statue was still visible or in circulation long after it was made. Moreover, cuneiform texts preserve copies of inscriptions on statuary made by enterprising scribes. Thus we know, for example, that statues of Akkadian kings that stood in the courtyard of the chief temple to Enlil at Nippur were visible some four or five centuries later when scribes copied their inscriptions (Garrison 2012: 43).

A somewhat different situation was documented at the Diyala sites in eastern Iraq, excavated by the Oriental Institute in the 1930s. Over a thousand cylinder seals were found in stratified contexts in the Sin Temple and the Temple Oval at Khafajah; the Abu Temple (and its later incarnations, the Square Temple and the Single-Shrine), the Gimilsin Temple, the Palace of the Rulers, and the Southern Building at Tell Asmar; the Shara Temple at Tell Agrab; and the Kititum and Shamash Temples at Tell Ischali. Here the

problem of “residuals” was acute. As Henri Frankfort explained in his publication of this corpus,

we found a starting point in the stratification of excavated and inscribed specimens; but the recognition of the styles in all their peculiarities and, after that, the explanation of their succession, became possible only when the thousands of seals of which the provenance was not known were utilized to add substance to the groups which we had distinguished and to make feasible a coherent account of the development of glyptic art. As the work proceeded, it became clear that the stratification did not always tally with the stylistic distinctions. The division of the seals over the separate layers of our sites presents an incomprehensible jumble of styles ... cylinder seals, many of which are practically indestructible ... were sometimes used for a long time after they were made.

(Frankfort 1955: 3)

Anticipating a negative reaction to this line of reasoning, Frankfort noted,

Some readers may feel qualms at admitting that a not inconsiderable number of seals antedate the layers in which they are found although stratification is rightly considered to be the backbone of relative chronology. But a mechanical and wholesale acceptance of stratigraphic data would deny all rhyme or reason to the very clear stylistic differences which we observe.

(Frankfort 1955: 4)

Frankfort’s stylistic arrangement of the Diyala seals, although published over half a century ago, remains largely correct in light of subsequent glyptic studies, confirming his own assessments of chronology and style. To cite just one example, the Square Temple at Tell Asmar, built during the Early Dynastic II period (ca. 2500 BCE), contained nine seals of that period, six of Early Dynastic I (ca. 2900–2700 BCE), and four of Protoliterate (Late Uruk/Jemdat Nasr) date, several of which might be as early as around 3400–3200 BCE. Moreover, five of the seals came from a foundation deposit within an altar: one of Jemdat Nasr date (ca. 3100–3000 BCE), one of Early Dynastic I style, and three of the Early Dynastic II era, when the temple was erected. As Frankfort observed,

It would be impossible to find a better example of the complications which even well stratified finds contain. There is no question of any disturbance of the soil, and all the stratigraphic facts are simple and comprehensible. The majority of the objects in the deposit date from the same period as that of the building in which they were found. But among the cylinders there are two or three which are survivals, and only the comparative study of a numerous series of varied origin can reveal the fact.

At some sites, objects including statuary, stelae, carved stone vessels, and cuneiform inscriptions appear to have been “curated” in what have been termed “museums” (Klengel-Brandt 1990; Calmeyer 1995; Thomason 2005). Various motivations probably underpinned the formation of such collections, but for our purposes the important point about them is that the objects contained in them were chronologically disparate and in many cases cannot be dated by the context in which they were found—no matter how well excavated that context may have been. A case in point is the “museum” of Nebuchadnezzar II at Babylon, which was assembled in the sixth century BCE. Housed in a building outside the imposing Ishtar Gate, it included such chronologically and culturally diverse objects as a Neo-Hittite stele depicting a weather god; statuary dating to around 2000 BCE from Mari on the Euphrates; and a relief of Shamash-resh-ussur, governor of Suhu and Mari, dating to the Neo-Assyrian period (Koldewey 1990: 161–69; Klengel-Brandt 1990; Thomason 2005: 209).

A similarly varied collection assembled by the Elamite king Shutruk-Nahhunte was found at Susa, in southwestern Iran. In this case, because the objects were inscribed with epigraphs, we often know where they were acquired. This was not a “museum,” however. Rather, all of the material was war booty. Infuriated that his claim to the Kassite throne (based upon the fact that his ancestors included at least four Kassite princesses) had been ignored, Shutruk-Nahhunte invaded Babylonia around 1158 BCE and brought down the Kassite dynasty (Potts 2015: 25–2). He looted Sippar, Eshnunna, and other sites, removing such important objects as the stele that bears the law code of Hammurabi, several statues of Akkadian kings, the victory stele of Naram-Sin, and over fifty stelae recording land entitlement (*narûs* or *kudurrus*; for the genre, see Slanski 2003). After transporting these objects (many weighing several tons) over hundreds of kilometers to Susa, Shutruk-Nahhunte had them reerected in a prominent position on the high mound (Acropole). Many of these works were over a thousand years old by the time they were reinstalled at Susa. Unfortunately for us, since the material was discovered in 1898 during the early excavations of Jacques de Morgan—notorious for his cutting trenches at Susa in a manner befitting his background in mining engineering—their context was ruined almost as badly as if the site had been looted by clandestine excavators (de Morgan 1900; Jaunay 1997: 460). Nevertheless, with the exception of some of the entitlement *narûs*, most of these war trophies were inscribed with epigraphs identifying the site from which they were taken (for example, “I destroyed Sippar,” “I destroyed Eshnunna”) and informing us that Shutruk-Nahhunte undertook his campaign at the behest of Inshushinak, the city god of Susa (Potts 2015: 2).

We could cite many other instances of objects that were discovered and redeposited in a much later archaeological context long after they were

manufactured and initially used (Garrison 2012: 42–46). In other instances, an object that was already ancient when it was deposited was not being “curated” when it was last in circulation. An example is the over life-sized stone statue of Darius I, of Egyptian manufacture, which was found at Susa in a pit dating to the Islamic era (see Figure 22.5 in Bryan, this volume) (Kervran 1972: 239). How it ended up where it was found, we cannot say.

All of these examples suffice to underscore the point that, although the archaeological context of an object may be impeccable—carefully excavated and documented—it does not necessarily reflect the period in which the object was made. Rather, it tells us how late the object was in circulation. This fact, in turn, may be significant when we try to understand how and why certain styles and iconographies persisted through time and moved through space.

The Afterlife of Monuments

This persistence of artistic styles and iconography in the ancient Near East has been documented on numerous occasions. Far from reflecting something about the collective unconscious of the region’s inhabitants, it must surely demonstrate that the visual record of earlier periods was accessible to craftsmen and artisans of later times, who were thus able to draw on an enormous artistic repertoire of images that had accumulated over millennia. The very nature of archaeological deposition, however, would seem to argue against such a notion. After all, Near Eastern sites are often mounds (Arabic *tell*, Persian *tappeh/tepe/tol*, Turkish *höyük*), which represent the accumulated, superimposed debris of successive periods of habitation. Would not the creations of earlier periods therefore be inaccessible to those who came along thousands of years later? Yet, as noted already, it takes nothing more than excavation—digging the foundations of a new house, temple, or palace; cutting a storage pit into the ground; or digging a well—to dredge up old material. Moreover, as we saw in the case of the cylinder seals used at the Diyala sites, objects of great durability, made of hard stone, had the capacity to survive and remain useful for hundreds of years before being taken out of circulation. In this way, the iconography of fourth-millennium BCE Mesopotamia was still current in the mid-third millennium at sites like Tell Asmar. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that craftsmen looked to the older material in designing their own artistic compositions and, for the most part, style and iconography seem to have changed over time, even as certain elements remained constant or, in many cases, were reworked. A winged sundisk on an Achaemenid cylinder seal is still a winged sundisk, even if its religious meaning and compositional details are completely different from those of winged sundisks on Neo-Assyrian or Urartian glyptic. The point is that given what we know about the longevity of durable objects

like cylinder seals, Achaemenid seal-cutters would almost certainly have had access to earlier specimens showing elements of iconography that they refashioned in a new context.

The situation is somewhat different when we consider monumental art, however. Here the sculptures in Gate R and Palace S at Cyrus the Great's capital, Pasargadae, are instructive. The Gate R relief ([Figure 25.1](#)) has been discussed extensively since the nineteenth century. It shows a standing, four-winged, bearded genius, facing right, wearing a fringed garment and headgear consisting of a ribbed helmet with an Egyptian-style, 'atef or *hnmh* crown on top (Stronach [1978](#): fig. 25; Álvarez-Mon [2010](#): 69). The debt this figure owes to the Neo-Assyrian *lamassu*, winged beings that flanked the doorways of Assyrian palaces, is significant, and for David Stronach, "the ultimate Assyrian ancestry of the four-winged genius is equally clear." He suggested (1978: 51) that the Pasargadae genius "must be descended from the type of winged magical guardian that is known from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad." At the same time, however, Stronach emphasized other "important precedents" in the form of three Neo-Babylonian stelae, one from Babylon and two from Harran, showing Nabonidus (555–539 BCE)—the king dethroned by Cyrus himself—in profile. Moreover, the Elamite garment worn by the Pasargadae winged genius has parallels with the dress worn by the vanquished Neo-Elamite king Teumman in Assurbanipal's reliefs at Nineveh (Southwest and North Palaces) from around 653 BCE and, with slight variations, in rock reliefs at Kul-e Farah, near Malamir in southwestern Iran, depicting Hanni, a local Elamite ruler of Ayapir who reigned around 625–585 BCE (Álvarez-Mon [2009](#): 26, 28). The figure's Egyptianizing crown, Stronach (1978: 52) has suggested, most likely drew inspiration from Syro-Phoenician sources, not from Egypt itself.



Figure 25.1 Relief carved with winged figure. Pasargadae, Gate R (ca. 540–530 BCE). Limestone; h. 2.90 m. Ernst Herzfeld Papers, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, FS-FSA_A.6_04.GN.0997.

The Palace S reliefs ([Figure 25.2](#)) show human-like legs with talons that recall those of lion-demons in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, as well as the bovine legs of a bull-man and the legs of a fish-cloaked genius (Stronach

1978: figs. 34–35). Trudy Kawami (1972: 147) has suggested that the type of fish-cloaked genius or fish-garbed priest (as she calls the figure) at Pasargadae was derived specifically from images in Sennacherib’s “Palace without Rival” at Nineveh. She has further suggested that—apart from an earlier diffusion of similar iconography from Assyria or Babylonia via glyptic and metal vessels—the standing ruins of Nineveh, which were certainly not obliterated in the sack of 614 BCE, provided “further opportunity for Persians to view the captured Assyrian capital with its royal buildings” (Kawami 1972: 148) and hence to see the same kinds of figures in Neo-Assyrian reliefs that appear at Pasargadae. While this may well be true, the reliefs at Pasargadae were certainly not carved by Persians; if they were, any stone carving immediately pre-dating Cyrus the Great that could adequately explain the high standard of the technically accomplished reliefs at Pasargadae has disappeared without a trace. In Álvarez-Mon’s (2010: 70) opinion, the Kul-e Farah reliefs imply the existence of Elamite stonemasons who could have contributed to the rendering of the garment worn by the winged genius. For the Assyrian content of both the Gate R and Palace S reliefs, he envisages instead an actual movement of craftsmen “formerly dependent on Assyrian patronage,” who migrated to Iran in order to find new employment and “lend their skills” to the sculptural program envisioned for Pasargadae (Álvarez-Mon 2010: 70).



Figure 25.2 Detail, doorjamb carved with bull-man and figure in fish cloak. Pasargadae, Palace S (ca. 540–530 BCE). Limestone; pres. h. 80 cm.

Photograph courtesy of Ann C. Gunter.

Both explanations require an artistic awareness of earlier iconography that can only be envisioned—notwithstanding the postulated circulation of imagery on seals and decorated metal vessels—if the craftsmen working at Pasargadae

were intimately familiar with both Neo-Assyrian palatial relief decoration and sculpture (*lamassus*) and Elamite rock-reliefs, specifically those at Kul-e Farah. The Bisotun relief of Darius I vividly illustrates that craftsmen employed by later Achaemenid rulers also drew inspiration from existing monuments. The relief's imagery echoes in striking fashion the early second-millennium rock-relief of Anubanini, king of the Lullubi, located on a cliff at Sarpol-e Zohab, near Qasr-e Shirin, not far from Bisotun (Potts 1999: 318, with bibliography).

Functional Contexts

In addition to considering contexts as stratigraphic units within the depositional history of a site, the broader category of 'functional' context can also be extremely important. The findspots of the large corpus of carved ivories from the Neo-Assyrian capital, Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), furnish an example (see in general Kertai 2015). The first several hundred fragments, discovered in 1847 by Austen Henry Layard, came principally from a series of rooms in the Northwest Palace (Barnett 1975: 169–90). Later excavations conducted by Max Mallowan brought to light ivories in the throne room itself (Herrmann 2005: 18; most recently, see Herrmann, Laidlaw, and Coffey 2009; Herrmann and Laidlaw 2013). From a social point of view, all the ivories were thus associated with the apex of Assyrian society: the king, his family and entourage, and the highest-ranking officials in the empire. Moreover, they came from rooms, such as the throne room, that were probably used by the Assyrian elite both for display and habitation.

Further excavations between 1958 and 1963 produced a large number of ivories at Fort Shalmaneser, an arsenal established by Shalmaneser III just outside the southeastern corner of Nimrud (Oates and Oates 2001: fig. 9 and 144–94). There, in the southern part of a room labeled SW 7, "over a depth of some 2 m from the ground surface to the floor, was one of the richest series of ivories recovered from the site." The northern part of the room, on the other hand, "was covered by a corroded mass of both bronze and iron scale armour" (Oates and Oates 2001: 168). In contrast to the situation in the Northwest Palace, the ivories from SW 7 were thus clearly found in a storage room. Moreover, the ivories from SW 7 included none that would be considered, on iconographic and stylistic grounds, "Assyrian" in style (Herrmann 2005: 18). The fact that they were kept in storage and were all non-Assyrian in style suggests instead that these ivories were items of booty from other parts of the empire. Elsewhere in Fort Shalmaneser, on the other hand, where Assyrians lived and worked, ivories in Assyrian style were found. Without this sort of contextual information, we would not be in a position properly to interpret the differential distribution of ivories belonging to different styles.

Two houses built alongside the Town Wall (TW) of Nimrud, which also yielded ivories, present a very different situation. Were these examples of “the luxury goods owned by ... wealthy householders,” as Mallowan suggested (Herrmann and Millard 2003: 385)? If correct, this inference says a good deal about access to ivory-inlaid furniture at Nimrud, perhaps suggesting that the wealthier, private citizens of the city—and not only the Assyrian ultra-elite—were able to enjoy such luxuries. In fact, a closer look at the archaeological context indicates otherwise. While the ivories were indeed found in the Town Wall houses, Joan and David Oates have suggested that “these ivories were rubbish from the North West Palace, dumped in the ruins of the TW houses when the citadel was being restored after the 614 [BCE] sack” (Oates and Oates 2001: 137–38; cf. Herrmann and Millard 2003: 385). Moreover, this suggestion is supported by the highly fragmentary nature of the ivories found there, indicating that they were either scavenged from the looted palace or dumped there, as Joan and David Oates suggested (Oates and Oates 2001: 139). Either way, the functional context of these finds makes an enormous difference to our understanding of their life cycle.

Analytical Methods

The use of scientific methods, particularly for compositional analysis, is now so widespread in all branches of art history that it scarcely needs an introduction. In some cases, compositional analyses may seek to discriminate between genuine and forged works of art: in examining the pigments of a painting attributed to Rembrandt, for example, or the fibers from a work on paper that appears old (but may not be). Similar analyses are routinely undertaken on ancient Near Eastern objects as well. Compositional analysis may show, for instance, that a metal object was made of an alloy that has only been known since the nineteenth or twentieth century. When objects are genuinely ancient, compositional analyses can also help identify the provenance of the raw material from which an object was made. In some cases, the potential provenance of a material is highly limited. Lapis lazuli, although found in various parts of the world (von Rosen 1988), was sourced almost exclusively from Badakhshan, Afghanistan (Moorey 1999); most carnelian came from Gujarat, India (Roux and Matarasso 1999). But the two materials differed significantly in important ways. On stylistic grounds, most of the lapis lazuli objects recovered in Mesopotamia would be considered “Mesopotamian.” In other words, the lapis from which they were made was transported as a raw material to urban centers far from the source area and there fashioned into objects by Mesopotamian craftsmen. Acknowledging the distant location of the lapis lazuli source raises important questions about supply and procurement as well as the relative social and aesthetic value of an

object made of an exotic material that came from a region which, in all probability, few if any Sumerians ever visited (André-Salvini 1999; Winter 1999).

Much of the carnelian that came to Mesopotamia, on the other hand, took the form of finished beads. Some were decorated using an etching technique that employed a solution made from a plant extract (*Capparis aphylla*) combined with sodium carbonate (washing soda, Na_2CO_3), which was painted onto the bead's surface. After heating, the painted areas became white, creating a distinctive pattern (Mackay 1933). As far as we know, this technique was only known and practiced in India. Other stones, such as agates from India (Michel 1999); rubies from Sri Lanka (Calligaro et al. 1999); and heulandite from Algeria (Lahanier 1976), were imported as raw materials, then used by Mesopotamian craftsmen to manufacture cylinder seals and other small objects or for small inlays (such as the eyes of statues). A wide range of Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf shells and mother-of-pearl were similarly imported and widely employed to manufacture inlays and cylinder seals (Tosi and Biscione 1981). Quarried, multi-ton blocks of hard stone—diorite, dolerite, gabbros—were imported into Mesopotamia from the Oman peninsula or southeastern Iran for the manufacture of royal statuary (Heimpel 1982).

In each of these cases, however, the style and iconography of an object tell only part of the story. While an object's raw material may imply a great deal about the procurement mechanisms involved, the symbolic value and connotations of different stones should not be forgotten. Certain stones, such as hematite, had a specific zodiacal connotation (in this case, Libra); others were thought to be efficacious in warding off evil and disease (André-Salvini 1999: 387, 389). Neither the intrinsic properties of a stone object, nor the iconography and style of its decoration, necessarily reveal its full significance within ancient value systems.

The Significance of New Discoveries

Archaeology is, of course, most often associated with discovery, and for over one hundred and fifty years archaeological excavations in the Near East have produced a steady stream of new material, revealing previously unknown styles and iconography. This pattern arises through discoveries made both in already well-studied regions and in understudied areas that may have been neglected in the past. When Ernest de Sarzec was sent to Basra as French vice-consul in 1877, for example, the Sumerian civilization was completely unknown. A few years later, his excavations at Tello (ancient Girsu) brought

to light statuary and reliefs in styles and with iconography that had never previously been seen (Hilprecht 1896: 65–79.).

In other cases, discoveries made by new excavations have provided answers to questions that have puzzled scholars for decades. This is true for the now sizable corpus of elaborately carved, soft stone (steatite or chlorite) vessels with varied iconography dating to the late third millennium BCE (Figure 25.3). Examples have been found from Mari and Palmyra in the west to Soch (Ferghana Valley, Uzbekistan) in the east, and from Mohenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley, to the United Arab Emirates, the Iranian Plateau, and southern and central Mesopotamia (Kohl 1978). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, excavations at Tepe Yahya in southeastern Iran produced hundreds of fragments of this material, along with unfinished and semifinished pieces, prompting the suggestion that it was a production center for these distinctive vessels. X-ray diffraction of 375 samples from the known corpus, combined with the publication of many examples from the island of Tarut, on the Persian Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, led scholars to identify a “Susa-Adab-Persian Gulf” group within the soft stone corpus, and to suggest that an as-yet-unidentified center of manufacture may have been located somewhere on the Arabian peninsula (Kohl, Harbottle, and Sayre 1979). In fact, the analyses, while in and of themselves unimpeachable, simply demonstrated that finds from Susa in southwestern Iran; Adab (Bismaya), in Mesopotamia; and Failaka and Tarut, in the Persian Gulf (with several outliers from Nippur and Tepe Yahya), clustered together and were probably made of stone from the same source and perhaps at the same site. But this fact tells us nothing about where that source was located. In light of these vessels’ unique iconography, more recent discoveries at Konar Sandal South, in southeastern Iran, located not far from Tepe Yahya, strongly suggest that all the material of this type was manufactured in southeastern Iran (Potts 2005: 77 n.6).



Figure 25.3 Vessel carved with architectural façade. Khafajah, Early Dynastic II (ca. 2700–2600 BCE). Steatite/chlorite; 6.5 × dia. 8.1 cm. Oriental Institute Museum OIM A12415.

Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

New archaeological discoveries may also contribute to identifying a hitherto “missing link”—geographical or chronological—between two objects or categories of object that have long been known but which, because of the distance separating them in space and time, could not be connected within a reasonable explanatory framework. One of the more enigmatic finds Sir Leonard Woolley made in PG 755, the so-called grave of Meskalamdug, in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, provides an example. The object (U. 10020) is a dagger (33 cm long) with a copper or bronze blade (24 cm long) and “a horned guard of gold over wood (the metal thin and much distorted) and grip of wood plated with silver secured by gold studs” (Woolley 1934: 552). Woolley (1934: 308) commented only briefly on the dagger, noting that it “has a gold crescent handle resembling a Twelfth Dynasty type from Egypt (Dashur).” Although he provided no reference for his statement, it is not

difficult to trace the origin of the idea. In 1894 Jacques de Morgan conducted a season of excavations at Dahshur, where he uncovered the pyramid-complex of Amenemhet II (de Morgan 1903). There, buried together in a shaft-tomb, were Amenemhet's daughters, the princesses Ita and Khnumet (Porter and Moss 1981: 886; Ryholt 1997: 83). Ita had been buried with a dagger consisting of a bronze blade and a crescentic pommel of lapis lazuli and gold, and it was this object that had struck Woolley as a likely parallel to the dagger of Meskalamdug. Chronologically, of course, as Woolley was aware, Ita's dagger dated to Dynasty 12 (ca. 1990–1785 BCE), while the Royal Tombs are generally placed around 2500 BCE.

A chronologically closer comparison now exists, however, in the form of daggers pecked into the exterior of large, unworked stones found in the Wadis Arf and al-Muhammadiyah in the Jawl highlands near Wadi Hadramawt in Yemen. At the site of al-Qibali 9 in the Wadi Arf, daggers of this type appear pecked into the exterior face of upright stones that form part of the perimeter wall of a circular tomb. Four examples in the Mukalla Museum are thought to be from Wadi al-Muhammadiyah. Burkhard Vogt (1997: 31, 33) dates the tomb at al-Qibali 9 to the second half of the third millennium BCE, while he places the stelae in the Mukalla Museum in the late third or early second millennium BCE.

Since Meskalamdug's dagger is the only example of its type from a site in Mesopotamia, the possibility that the dagger with crescent-shaped pommel is originally a Mesopotamian type seems unlikely. It is equally improbable that the type was originally Egyptian, quite apart from the fact that it is apparently unknown there prior to Dynasty 12. The sheer number of representations in the Hadramawt make a South Arabian origin far more likely, and to those already mentioned we can add at least one more from a much later period. A well-known alabaster plaque from al-Juba, now in the National Museum at Sana'a', shows a young male wearing a knife in his belt. In his left hand he clutches a sword, whose crescentic handle closely resembles those on the much earlier stelae described above. The plaque has been dated to the first century BCE/CE (Roux 1997: 206).

Taking all of the evidence together, it seems likely that a distinctive type of dagger with crescentic pommel was in use in South Arabia from the mid-third millennium to the time of Christ. The isolated examples of daggers with crescentic pommels from Ur and Dahshur were therefore probably imports, and the actual home of the type should be situated in South Arabia, more specifically in the environs of the Wadi Hadramawt. This likelihood raises the question: what sort of contacts may have existed between Early Dynastic Ur and South Arabia in the mid-third millennium BCE? Interestingly, cuneiform evidence for the use of incense (ŠIM.GIG), the principal commodity traded by the later South Arabian states, first appears in southern Mesopotamia in the Early Dynastic III texts of Lugalanda and Urukagina from Lagash, which also

attest a “merchant of aromatics” (GARAŠ.ŠIM) (Zarins 1997: 261). These texts date shortly after the time the dagger found at Ur would have been deposited.

Conclusion

In most cases, the ancient Near Eastern art brought back to Europe by premodern collectors lacks any provenance; consequently, the information that it can provide will always be limited. Once monuments began to be documented in situ, and excavations commenced in the nineteenth century, a far greater amount of contextual information became available with which better to interpret ancient Near Eastern art. It is important, however, for art historians and archaeologists to recognize that contexts, whether functional or stratigraphic, are themselves subject to a variety of social forces. These dynamics need to be understood in order to avoid confusing the date of an object’s manufacture with the date of its deposition.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Potts 2012 offers up-to-date, comprehensive studies on a wide range of periods and cultures in the ancient Near East. Curtis et al. 2008 provides a wealth of studies on a wide range of topics related to the Nimrud excavations. Heinz and Bonatz 2002 assembles a series of stimulating essays on the visual image in the ancient Near East. For a critical overview of excavation methodology and archaeological practice, see Lucas 2001.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Cultural Heritage across the Middle East, Ancient and Modern

Geoff Emberling and Katharyn Hanson

Introduction

The art and material culture of the ancient Middle East was produced, displayed, and used in antiquity with varied intentions and interpretations. As some of these objects outlived their makers and original owners, they began to take on new significance as markers of ancestral memories. Selectively buried, destroyed, or curated in intentional collections in the past or today, they represent versions of past cultures.

Connections between ancient cultures and groups of people are political assertions of memory and identity. As such, they are historically contingent, even as they are often deeply felt. This asserted connection has in modern times been known as *cultural heritage*, and its material manifestations termed *cultural property*. The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined cultural property as

movable or immovable property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people, such as monuments of architecture, art or history, whether religious or secular; archaeological sites; groups of buildings which, as a whole, are of historical or artistic interest; works of art; manuscripts, books and other objects of artistic, historical or archaeological interest; as well as scientific collections and important collections of books or archives or of reproductions of the property defined above.

(UNESCO 1954)

The materiality of tangible cultural heritage provides its lasting power, and its physical possession raises the possibility of tensions between competing claims on objects, monuments, historical understandings, and even territories.¹ Most obvious are competing claims among nations or groups. The interests of the international community, as represented by UNESCO and other heritage organizations, are framed as an attempt to depoliticize heritage (Di Giovine 2009). Yet members of the international community have also

claimed ownership of objects that has resulted in the creation of large museums and private collections outside the Middle East. The discussions surrounding the importance or legitimacy of “encyclopedia museums” (Cuno 2009) suggest that these international interests are not politically neutral, either. The UNESCO definition of cultural heritage asserts the interests of the international community in the cultural heritage of “every people”—although it strives for impartiality, it is inherently political.

The idea that protecting archaeological objects and monuments of *all* cultures is important is relatively recent. More typical are discussions of national and cultural identities that incorporate elements of ancient cultural heritage and monuments as the heritage of a specific people or nation. Yet these connections were not previously asserted in the same way, in many cases not before late Ottoman times. It is worth noting that other notions of time and history are possible. The ruins of the past have also been interpreted as moral lessons on human frailty, for example, or romantic places to haunt the imagination (see Dawdy 2010).

This chapter briefly surveys interpretations and uses of cultural heritage in the ancient Near East.² This history contrasts with more recent efforts to protect cultural heritage, which are reviewed in more detail. They include establishing national antiquities laws, antiquities services, and museums, as well as international conventions that have attempted to restrict trade in looted antiquities and protect cultural heritage in wartime.

“Cultural Heritage” and its Uses in the Ancient Near East

While there are certainly no ancient terms that correspond precisely to “cultural heritage” or “cultural property” (see Miles 2008), there was certainly a sense of the power of objects to stand for larger concepts, including ethnic groups. The MAR.TU (Amorite) dagger mentioned in the Ebla texts provides an early example (Archi 1985).

From the time of the first Mesopotamian states in the fourth millennium BCE, rulers came to depend on constructed objects to legitimate their authority. Royal inscriptions highlight the construction of urban monuments, including temples—particularly important to legitimation as a public demonstration of ties between kings and gods—but also city walls, palaces, and irrigation projects. At the same time, inscriptions mention the creation of movable monuments such as statues of gods and of the kings themselves, stelae with inscriptions and images, and smaller precious objects. The very ability to craft these material things, often made of exotic raw materials, further demonstrated the authority and effectiveness of kings and their favor in the

eyes of the gods (Winter 2003). Collections of these objects in symbolically salient places created a genealogy for Mesopotamian kingship. Royal donations to the temple of Enlil in Nippur (the Ekur), for example, were copied and restored for centuries (Thomason 2005: 100–1; Garrison 2012).

Gifts and tribute in precious materials and finished objects formed one way in which relations between rulers and subject groups could be expressed and displayed. Raids and sustained warfare could also extract substantial quantities of objects taken as booty (see e.g., Gunter 2009: 164–77).

Specific monuments could also be targets for raiding by other kings. The cult statue of the Babylonian god Marduk was repeatedly stolen from his temple in Babylon, first by Assyrian raids and then by Elamites, who assembled an extensive array of objects from Babylon and nearby cities that was then displayed in their capital city, Susa. While a Babylonian raid on Susa later recaptured the statue of Marduk, other monuments—including the Stele of Naram-Sin and the Stele of Hammurabi—remained on display at Susa. French archaeologists excavated them in 1898 and 1901 respectively (Harper and Amiet 1992; Thomason 2005: 106–7; Crawford 2007).

Cult statues were a particular focus of Neo-Assyrian imperial conquest (Berlejung 2012; Schaudig 2012). Royal inscriptions describe the victorious Assyrian army bringing statues of foreign gods back to Assyria, a theme also depicted in palace reliefs (see Figure 14.3 in Downes, this volume). The removal and display of these statues, which the gods were thought to inhabit, demonstrated that deities had abandoned their people. The statues could be returned when Assyria considered that political conditions had become favorable.

Even in antiquity, rulers made selective connections to the material world of their own predecessors (Beaulieu 2013). Neo-Assyrian kings particularly valued the example of the rulers of the earliest Mesopotamian empire, that of Akkad. In an attempt to legitimate his usurpation of the throne, Sargon II (721–705 BCE) took as his throne name the name of the first Akkadian king, Sargon (“true king”), and adopted elements of Akkadian iconography in the decoration of his palace at Khorsabad, including the “hero with six curls.” Newly composed texts celebrated the life of the ancient Sargon (Lewis 1980). It is telling that the famous bronze head of an Akkadian ruler (Figure 26.1) was discovered not in an Akkadian context, but near the Ishtar Temple at Nineveh, where it was perhaps displayed for similar ideological purposes (Nylander 1980; Westenholz 2012: 100–2). Neo-Babylonian rulers, particularly Nabonidus (555–539 BCE), went beyond previous royal pronouncements concerning temple building and restoration to excavate architecture, texts, and monuments of past kings (Winter 2000; Schaudig 2003; Garrison 2012). Some of these finds from Babylonian excavations were displayed in the temple of Shamash at Sippar. In a similar use of past cultural heritage, a local Greco-Aramaean ruler of the second century BCE assembled

statues of Gudea of Lagash—which he probably discovered while constructing his palace over the remains of Gudea’s temple to Ningirsu—and displayed them in the courtyard of his palace, where they were discovered by French excavators in the nineteenth century (Suter 2012, with bibliography).³



Figure 26.1 Head of Akkadian ruler. Nineveh, near Ishtar Temple; Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2200 BCE). Copper alloy; h. 36.6 cm. Iraq Museum 11331. Hirmer Verlag Fotoarchiv.

Material remains of the past also extended to knowledge and its materialized form in written texts. On multiple occasions, from Assurbanipal to Alexandria to the Abbasid Beit al-Hikma (“House of Wisdom”) in Baghdad, these texts

were gathered and copied in libraries, and sometimes destroyed. Arguably these texts were also a form of cultural property, although written knowledge (and its keepers) could also serve to provide constraints on royal authority.

National Laws, Antiquities Services, and Museums

New relationships to the cultural heritage of the Middle East began to develop in the nineteenth century, both for Europeans and for people across the Middle East (Kersel 2010). Earlier, beginning in the seventeenth century, European rulers, nobility, and merchants began collecting objects other than fine art in “cabinets of curiosities” (Impey and MacGregor 1985). These collections included geological specimens and ethnographic objects as well as antiquities and they formed the basis for major museum collections in Europe, both national (Louvre, British Museum) and university (Ashmolean, Pitt Rivers). As expressions of increasing international contacts, both mercantile and colonial, these collections represented knowledge of areas, cultures, and histories that could be controlled.

The Ottoman Empire

The association of antiquarian knowledge with colonial power was made explicit following the French invasion of Mamluk Egypt, nominally under Ottoman Turkish control, in 1798. Napoleon’s invading army included a group of scholars whose monumental publication, the *Description de l’Égypte* (1809–29), long outlasted French occupation of the country. The Capitulation of Alexandria that codified French surrender to Britain stipulated that the Rosetta Stone and other antiquities discovered by French scholars would become British property. At this point, there was little Egyptian or Ottoman interest in these antiquities as objects of cultural heritage or value.

Large-scale trade in Egyptian antiquities to Europe had begun in the 1810s, chiefly by European consuls—Henry Salt for Britain and Bernardino Drovetti for France—as well as their agents, who included Giovanni Belzoni. Both national museums and private collections acquired Egyptian antiquities. Jean-François Champollion’s decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822 further stimulated public and scholarly interest, both in Europe and in Egypt. A nineteenth-century account of Egyptian history written by the Egyptian historian al-Jabarti remarked on European willingness to spend fortunes to acquire antiquities (Reid 2002; Colla 2007).

As a result of the increasing volume of exported antiquities, Mohammad Ali—the governor of Egypt nominally under Ottoman control—in 1835 enacted

the Middle East's first law restricting the export of antiquities. It was widely ignored, however, both by Europeans and Egyptian rulers, who continued to use antiquities as political gifts. The law's many ambiguities are perhaps not surprising, given its pioneering status, but it did engender a shift in European views of Egyptian antiquities. Whereas European museums and collectors had previously declared that Egyptians did not care about antiquities, after passage of the law Europeans began instead to emphasize Egyptian incompetence to protect antiquities (Colla 2007: 103–4). This period also witnessed early attempts to reframe ancient Egypt as the ancestor of Western civilization, rather than ancestral to contemporary Egyptians.

Interest in antiquities elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire grew significantly after the rediscovery of ancient Assyria's capital cities in the 1840s (Larsen 1996; Bahrani 2011). Earlier, British officials including Claudius Rich and Henry Rawlinson, both based in the British East India Company's Baghdad office, had collected antiquities on a relatively smaller scale, primarily in the attempt to decipher cuneiform script. British and French excavations at the Neo-Assyrian capitals of Nineveh, Nimrud, and Khorsabad by Austen Henry Layard and Paul-Émile Botta resulted in huge shipments of antiquities to the British Museum and the Louvre, even if their excavations had begun without permission from the Ottoman authorities (Bohrer 2003; Bahrani 2011: 132).

The first law governing antiquities within the Ottoman Empire was passed in 1869, followed in 1874 and 1884 by better-known and stricter laws (Shaw 2003; Eldem 2011). These laws' concern was more imperial than national, more interested in gathering antiquities in Constantinople than preserving cultural heritage (Emberling 2010a, 2010b; Bahrani 2011). They led to the establishment in 1891 of a new Imperial Museum headed by Osman Hamdi, known in part today as an accomplished Orientalist painter (Shaw 2011b).

Of these Ottoman antiquities laws, the 1884 law was the most comprehensive, offering a definition of antiquities that applied to coins and objects made of precious metal, and to gravesites, monuments, and statues. Published both in French and Ottoman Turkish, the law aimed to restrict foreign acquisition of movable cultural heritage fueled by western European Orientalism. It introduced the notion that archaeological sites and objects were protected by law and it established state (imperial) ownership of all types of antiquities (Shaw 2003: 110–11). Despite Ottoman intentions, however, these laws were never systematically enforced, and were often undermined by individual exceptions (Bernhardsson 2005: 48).

Colonial and Mandate Laws

Increased competition among colonial powers for museum-quality artifacts and the resulting influx of Western archaeological expeditions influenced the

creation of new antiquities laws in the era of colonial control over the Middle East (Magee 2012). Colonial-era policies often turned to laws controlling the export of antiquities to benefit a particular Western nation.

In Turkey, the 1884 law created by Osman Hamdi remained the primary instrument for protecting antiquities until 1972 (UNESCO 2017). The Decree of Antiquities, known as the “1906 Decree,” made one significant addition: it reasserted state ownership of all movable and immovable antiquities and forbade their export. The law continued to be enforced after World War I, as illustrated by the efforts of Turkish museums to keep collections inside the country and intact even when the area was under French and British military occupation (Özdoğan 1998: 115–16).

In Iraq under the British Mandate, the 1922 British Treaty of Alliance established protection for antiquities under Article XIV. As British liaison to the Iraqi government, Gertrude Bell worked on Iraq’s Antiquities Law No. 40 of 1924, the country’s first national antiquities law (Vrdoljak 2009: 5). Passed in part to protect British interests in excavation permits and export of artifacts, this Mandate-period legislation did not stop the illegal pillage and export of Iraq’s cultural material. But exports of antiquities did decrease dramatically, as evidenced by a concurrent and substantial rise in the price of Mesopotamian artifacts in Europe (Bernhardsson 2005: 126). Iraqi scholars questioned the intent of the new law because it still protected the interests of foreign archaeological missions. By contrast, Greece’s national ownership law kept all artifacts in Greece and housed at the National Museum (Bernhardsson 2005; Kersel 2010: 88–89).

As in Iraq, Palestine’s first antiquities laws were created under the British Mandate. First issued in 1924, the British Mandate antiquities law established an office with a role similar to that of a Department of Antiquities, which supervised archaeological work in the region. Mandate civil administration created a Director of the Department of Antiquities for Palestine and crafted an Antiquities Ordinance for Mandate Palestine, which decreed state ownership of cultural heritage and created the Palestine Department of Antiquities and an archaeological advisory board (Kersel 2010: 88–89). Foreign missions in the Levant initially focused on geographical expeditions to locate biblical place names and make accurate maps of the region for colonial interests (Emberling 2010a: 17–18). Colonial efforts also sought to acquire artifacts related to the Bible. An article in the 1922 Palestine Mandate of the League of Nations guaranteed member states access to excavations in Palestine (Kersel 2010: 88–89).

As in Palestine and Iraq, in Jordan the British Mandate administration established the first antiquities laws in the 1920s. The later (1934) Antiquities Law of Transjordan determined that all antiquities discovered after 1922 belonged to the Transjordan government. The Department of Antiquities, formed in 1928, remained under the authority of Jordanian officials until

1936, when a British archaeologist was appointed as Director-General of Antiquities (Costello and Palumbo 1995: 541–52).

In Syria and Lebanon, the French Mandate also oversaw antiquities (Chevalier 2002: 283–301). Of several Mandate-period decrees, the most widely cited and comprehensive antiquities legislation was the 1933 “Decree Setting Forth the Regulations Governing Antiquities,” which until recent decades remained the governing law for all cultural heritage in those nations (UNESCO 2017).

The development of Egypt’s antiquities law began with the 1835 Ordinance of Mohammad Ali, which imposed restrictions on exporting movable antiquities and clearly responded to the robust European interest in ancient Egyptian artifacts (Colla 2007: 101). As elsewhere in the region, the law’s existence failed to prevent commercial export and wholesale looting of the country’s antiquities, due to lack of compliance and lack of enforcement. Even the creation of Egypt’s Antiquities Service in the 1850s had little effect. A revolt in 1882 resulted in a colonial British “protectorate” that governed until 1936, creating an environment favorable to foreign archaeological missions (Emberling 2010a: 17–18). The first museum of Egyptian antiquities was also founded at this time. The sentiment behind it led to the establishment of the Egyptian Antiquities House or Museum in 1897, completed in 1902 (el Batraoui and Khafagui 2010).

Although Iran was never colonized, France exercised considerable influence on the recovery and collecting of its artifacts. In 1884, the Franco-Persian Archaeological Convention gave French missions a monopoly on all excavations in Iran, while requiring a division of excavated material between France and the government of Naser al-Din Shah Qajar (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 122–23). After two incidents in which French missions violated this and a subsequent convention, a third and final Franco-Persian Archaeological Convention was signed in 1900. This version continued the practice of monopoly and division but also permitted France to take all finds from Susa. This arrangement was only overturned in 1924, long after the Iranian constitutional revolution of 1906 (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 122–24).

Creation of Antiquities Services, National Laws, and Museums

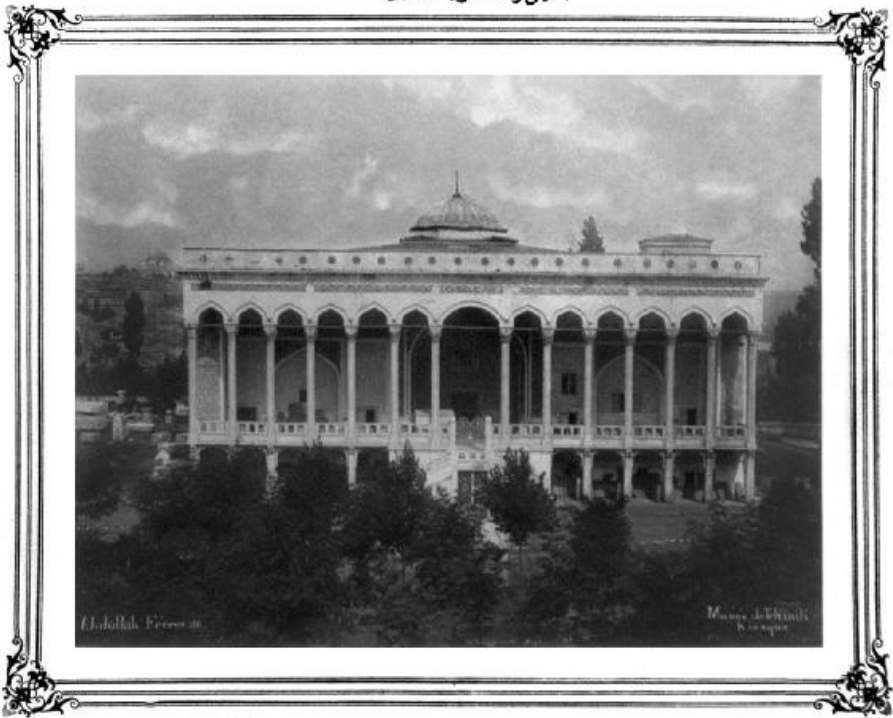
In most Middle Eastern nations the first antiquities services, national laws, and museums had been established during the colonial era, either by mandate officials or under colonial diplomatic pressure. These efforts paved the way for later nationalist efforts to protect each nation’s cultural heritage according to political priorities. Often the newly independent states maintained colonial-

era legislation, buildings, and departments relating to archaeology.

These first national approaches to protecting cultural heritage were also influenced by the successes or failures of similar efforts in neighboring countries (Kersel 2010: 88). Most of the first protection efforts during the colonial era were based on the 1884 Ottoman law, and many of the new national laws, museums, and antiquities services also derived from that law. Colonial-era and later national antiquities laws also shared commonalities because most were shaped by the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, which required mandated regions to enact laws controlling excavation permits and the export of antiquities (Vrdoljak 2013: iv). In reality, these first national laws, and the antiquities services and museums, were designed within and carried over from a system that benefited colonial interests. Archaeological excavations were funded through public and private museums, societies, and universities in the United States, and national governments in Europe, chiefly to obtain high-value objects. Foreign diplomatic officials were also often involved in some type of collection effort for their national museums. In this context, the practice of partition or a “fair division” was common, enlarging museum collections in the United States and Europe (Emberling 2010a: 19–20).

In Turkey, the new republic founded in 1923 continued to enforce the earlier 1906 Decree and the main legal instrument of the 1884 Ottoman period law. Importantly, the 1926 Turkish Civil Code also declared state ownership of antiquities (Özsunay 1997: 278–90). By 1930, the Turkish Historical Society was founded with a focus on the “roots of Turkish history” and an emphasis on national pride. The first volume of the *Journal of Turkish History, Archaeology and Ethnography* appeared in 1933 and the Turkish Historical Society was founded in 1937, reflecting a scholarly move toward archaeology and protection of sites (Tanyeri-Erdemir 2006: 382–84). Around the same time, the Turkish Historical Society organized two congresses. Between 1935 and 1937 a number of Turkish scholars launched archaeological excavations, and the Society worked to get their discoveries into the public press. International scholars were the intended audience of the Second Turkish Congress of History in 1937. Archaeological reports served not only to illustrate national pride, but also to demonstrate Turkey’s modern scholarly achievements (Özdoğan 1998: 116–17; Tanyeri-Erdemir 2006: 382–88).

The Ottoman Imperial Museum had formally opened in 1869 (Figure 26.2). Within the first decades of the twentieth century several museums were established in the provinces, although most were primarily storage facilities with little emphasis on display. By the 1920s, the Ottoman Imperial Museum collection had moved and was renamed the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. This period also began a decidedly secular emphasis in museum displays and preservation of historic buildings (Shaw 2011a: 925–30).



Vue du Musée Impérial de Chénili - Kiosque

Figure 26.2 Çinili Köşk (Tiled Pavilion), Istanbul, built 1472; used as Ottoman Imperial Museum from 1875 to 1891.

Print from photograph by Abdullah Frères, 1880–93. Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Abdul Hamid II Collection, LC-USZ62-80998.

In Iran the Franco-Persian archaeological convention continued French monopoly over much archaeological work until the mid-1920s. Unlike Turkey, however, in Iran there were very early efforts to establish an Antiquities Department. An Iranian Ministry of Sciences existed from 1866 and theoretically included archaeology, although until 1910 no section was actively charged with excavations and monuments. In 1910 the Minister of Education created the short-lived Central Antiquities Service to manage all antiquities, excavations, and the art market, but it existed for only eighteen months; subsequent attempts to pass legislation failed in part because of French lobbying (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 122–26). During the 1920s, the nongovernmental Society for National Heritage and the German archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld worked to end the French monopoly (Mousavi 2005). By 1927 the French had given up their monopoly, but required the director of Iran’s antiquities service to be a French national. With a committee that included the French-appointed General Director of Antiquities, the Iranian antiquities law of 1930 was drafted and then ratified (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 130–32).

Creation of the first museums in Iran proved far more successful than attempts to pass national legislation. The first museum was established in 1876 within the palace in Tehran. Although it focused on displaying cultural objects the shah had collected on his European trips, it also demonstrated interest in building a museum collection for display (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 127). In 1897, the French proposed establishing an archaeological museum with a French director in an effort to manipulate the system in their favor, but it became unnecessary when they were able to secure a monopoly with their Franco-Persian archaeological conventions. Thus a national museum in Iran was not pursued until the Ministry of Education was able to solidify the Antiquities Service, which opened the National Museum in Tehran in 1917 (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 127–37).

Iraq's national antiquities laws, museums, and antiquities services also arose from colonial-era policies and interests. As mentioned earlier, Gertrude Bell and British Mandate officials established Iraq's first national antiquities law in 1924, Antiquities Law No. 40 (Vrdoljak 2009: 5). Two years later the first national museum opened. With the museum's founding also came the precursor to today's State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (Bernhardsson 2005: 155); officials also worked to enforce export restrictions and develop education programs. Iraq's efforts in the mid-1930s to recover the Samarra collection, a group of early Islamic (ninth-century) artifacts, provide an example. Because the collection had been excavated in 1914, the British Museum trustees claimed full ownership, declaring that Iraq "could have no legal claim to these antiquities." Based on the divisions required by the Ottoman-period laws, however, Iraq did have a claim. The British Museum was eventually forced to return a small portion of the collection in 1936 (Bernhardsson 2005: 79; Vrdoljak 2009: 8–9). The Samarra collection restitution request was only one of several shifts toward a more comprehensive and nationalistic approach to antiquities in Iraq during the 1930s.

As in Iraq, colonial-era competition in acquiring artifacts heavily influenced the development of Mandate-period antiquities laws and department in Palestine. In 1920 the Palestine Archaeological Museum and the Department of Antiquities were established. Palestine's first antiquities law following the 1884 Ottoman law was devised in 1920 by the British as the Antiquities Ordinance, then revised and put into effect in 1929 (Kersel 2008: 25–26; Keane and Azarov 2013: 312). As in Iraq, British institutions and archaeologists pushed for a relaxed approach to legislating government ownership of antiquities. As a result, the Antiquities Ordinance of Palestine, like others at the time, allowed for partition between the Civil Government of Palestine and foreign excavators (Keane and Azarov 2013: 312–13).

The Jordanian antiquities laws were also initiated under British influence. The British Mandate issued the first Antiquity law in 1924, a year after the

Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DOA) was formed within the British Mandate government (Costello and Palumbo 1995: 547). At the same time, the DOA opened the first archaeological museum at the site of Jerash, which some criticized as more a storage location than a museum (Alawneh, Alghazawi, and Balaawi 2012: 106–7). In 1928 the DOA moved to Amman from Jerash, which was transferred to Palestine. Given ongoing British control over Jordan, the DOA's subsequent director was a British archaeologist, appointed in 1936 (Alawneh, Alghazawi, and Balaawi 2012: 105–6).

During the Mandate, French authorities founded a Department of Antiquities in Lebanon and established the first museums in Syria, at Damascus and Aleppo. The National Museum in Damascus, inaugurated in 1936, was the hub for the Service des Antiquités, the Mandate precursor to the current Syrian Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (al-Maqdissi 2008: 16). In Lebanon, the French Mandate Decree of 1933 was the governing law for all antiquities until the 1980s, and in Syria until independence in 1946. The most important provision of this law, like other laws in the region, granted state ownership of all antiquities. Of course there were exceptions, and although the law prohibited the unlicensed export of antiquities, such licenses were plentiful. Like the other laws reviewed thus far, the Decree of 1933 defined antiquities as any pre-1700 immovable or movable remains and designated some post-1700 structures as historic monuments (UNESCO 2017).

Unlike Syria and Lebanon, Egypt had an earlier history of legal protection for cultural heritage. As mentioned above, the 1880 Egyptian Antiquities Decree established government ownership of antiquities and served as precedent for the 1912 Egyptian Law of Antiquities No. 14 (UNESCO 2017). Although Law No. 14 maintained state ownership of all antiquities much like antiquities laws of other nations a decade later, the 1912 Egyptian law provided for the division of finds with foreign excavation teams. The law did give the Egyptian antiquities service the right to choose its share of finds and allowed for the purchase of objects considered to be of national importance. It also permitted the sale of artifacts under the oversight of the Minister of Public Works (Kersel 2010: 87).

National Laws and More Recent Histories

In newly independent Middle Eastern states, nationalist goals shaped new antiquities laws, new museums, and the appointment of local directors of antiquities services. New legislation rejected the export permissiveness of the colonial era, but in turn was subject to interpretation and enforcement by individual customs agents, officials, and the Department of Antiquities. By the 1950s and 1960s, most nations in the region had strong Ministries of Culture

that today form the basis of Middle Eastern cultural heritage policies.

In Turkey, the nationalism that fueled the growth of archaeology persisted. The discipline gained sufficient local popularity that by the late 1940s a new crop of Turkish-trained archeologists took over the preservation of cultural heritage. Today, the country has restrictive requirements for archaeological excavation permits, a selective policy initiated by the first generation of Turkish archaeologists and antiquities officials (Özdoğan 1998: 118). In the 1960s began a major push to open public museums throughout the country, so that storehouses and archives previously used to house locally excavated artifacts became regional museums. Archaeological and ethnographic museums in Istanbul became models for smaller regional museums (Shaw 2011a: 934–35). The major legislative development in this period was the antiquities law of 1973, the first substantive change since 1906. It ended the division of finds, defined its use of “site,” required the registration of sites, and expanded the law’s intent to historic architecture, specifically including both monumental public buildings and residences (Eres and Yalman 2013: 36).

During the 1980s, there were two major changes to cultural heritage preservation in Turkey. First, increased tourism and economic growth encouraged the creation of new “on site” museums and privately funded museums (Shaw 2011a: 935–38). Second, a new Law on the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Property was enacted in 1983, the same year that Turkey signed the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, whose language influenced the domestic law. This law replaces the term *antiquity* with *cultural property*, expands its definition, and clarifies which institutions and organizations are obligated to protect these sites (Eres and Yalman 2013: 36–37). The 1983 law tasks three government bodies with responsibility for protecting cultural property: the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the High Council of Protection, and the Regional Council of Protection (Özsunay 1997: 278–90).

After the French excavation monopoly ended in the 1930s, Iran opened up to other foreign archeological missions, whose work (particularly at famous sites such as Persepolis) the Iranian government used to foster national identity and pride (Abdi 2001: 51–52). The new archaeological museum, known as the Central National Museum of Iran, opened in Tehran in 1937 (Nasiri-Moghaddam 2014: 127–37). After World War II, foreign missions were welcomed as a means to develop ideas of national heritage centered on ancient Iran. As a result, archaeological excavations increased dramatically, and foreigners and Iranians even undertook some preservation work during the 1960s and 1970s. By the 1960s Iran had established the Archaeological Service of Iran to conduct work and coordinate the foreign missions. Tehran University’s archaeology department also trained local scholars and carried out research (Abdi 2001: 66). Because of the 1979 Revolution and the Iran-

Iraq war (1980–88), all foreign missions halted work in Iran, substantially reducing the rate of excavation (Abdi 2001: 51). From the legislative standpoint, fewer changes have occurred. Although the Iranian government has subsequently passed more than eighteen related laws, the 1930 National Heritage Protection Act remains the main legal instrument of cultural heritage protection. These laws have affected exemptions and cultural heritage associations, but have not altered the character of the 1930 Act (UNESCO 2017; Rouhani 2011).

An increasingly nationalistic approach toward heritage and archaeology emerged after 1932 in independent Iraq. This shift was codified in 1936 by Antiquities Law No. 59, which reaffirmed state ownership of all objects over two hundred years old, including both movable and immovable antiquities; it also prohibited the export of antiquities unless authorized and used by the Directorate for scientific studies, exchange, or exhibition (Vrdoljak 2009: 9). Despite several amendments in the 1970s, the 1936 law remained the legal code governing antiquities until 2002, when Law 55 clearly designated the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) as the authority in charge of Iraq's cultural heritage (UNESCO 2017).

An expanding interest in cultural heritage more broadly matched the development of legislation in Iraq. By 1951, the Institute for the Study of Antiquities and Ancient Civilizations trained the archaeologists who became the indigenous scholarly establishment (Bernhardsson 2005: 64–65). In the 1960s the Iraq National Museum moved to its current location and formally became a national, rather than a Baghdad, museum. In addition, enrollment in university archaeology departments and site work by Iraqi archaeologists increased dramatically. Given the Gulf Wars and periods of instability, Western archaeological tourism in Iraq has not yet rebounded. Yet SBAH, traditionally under the Ministry of Culture, was recently moved into the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

Although somewhat slower to develop in Jordan, nationalism and the rejection of colonial policies are evident in antiquities legislation, the practice of archaeology, the establishment of museums, and the department of antiquities. Jordan became independent in 1946, but the British retained control over some parts of government; consequently, the Department of Antiquities remained under a British director until 1956 (Alawneh, Alghazawi, and Balaawi 2012: 105–8). Dr. Abdel Kareem Al-Gharaybeh's appointment as the first Jordanian to serve as Director-General marks the point in the mid-1950s when Jordanian archaeologists and officials began to control the preservation of cultural heritage (Costello and Palumbo 1995: 541–52). Museums followed a similar history. After 1923, when the British founded a museum, no new museums were established until the National Museum of Jordan, the Archaeological Museum on the Amman Citadel, opened in 1951 (Alawneh, Alghazawi, and Balaawi 2012: 108).

Income from tourism increasingly supported museums and cultural heritage sites in Jordan, as placing the Department of Antiquities under the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in 1967 indicated. As elsewhere in the region, the government demonstrated that it valued the tourism potential of cultural heritage over its educational or cultural potential, since it could equally have placed the department under the Ministry of Education or Ministry of Culture (Costello and Palumbo 1995: 547). Cultural heritage legislation reflects this shift toward tourism. The first Jordanian antiquities law was enacted in 1929 and reestablished in 1947; updates and amendments followed multiple times (notably in 1953, 1968, 1976, 1988, and most recently in 2004). The law defines antiquities and heritage sites pre-dating 1700, vests their ownership in the state, and charges the Department of Antiquities with their protection (Alawneh, Alghazawi, and Balaawi 2012: 105–8).

As in Jordan, promulgation of the first national cultural heritage policies in Israel and Palestine came later than in their larger neighbors. Until the late 1940s, cultural heritage was administered by the British Mandate and subject in particular to the 1929 Antiquities Ordinance No. 51. After 1948 the Israeli government preserved the 1929 Ordinance, although it did establish an Antiquities Unit dedicated to protecting archaeological heritage in response to reports of military looting (Kersel 2008: 26–27). In the West Bank, the Antiquities Law and Department of Antiquities of Jordan was the controlling authority. The Gaza Strip was subject to Egypt's antiquities laws, although technically the 1929 Ordinance remained the law of these territories (Keane and Azarov 2013: 312–13). The 1929 Ordinance was not superseded until 1966 and continues to serve as the foundation for all Israeli and Palestinian legislation, including excavation permits and provisions for licensing and dealing in the sale of artifacts. For the area as a whole, two Military Orders, issued in 1973 and 1986, impacted cultural heritage. The Israeli antiquities law enacted in 1978 and updated in 1989 reaffirmed state ownership of artifacts and sites and authorized the Israel Antiquities Authority as the responsible body, allowing it also to issue export permits (Kersel 2008: 28–29).

In 1994 the Palestinian Authority established the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, which drafted an antiquities law. As part of the Oslo II Agreement, the Department of Antiquities and Cultural Heritage was made responsible for sites within the Palestinian Authority and for drafting legislation (Kersel 2008: 30–32; Keane and Azarov 2013: 315–18). Persistent interest in biblical sites, and the marketing of antiquity as part of leisure travel to Israel, has generated an abundance of museums, heritage centers, and archaeological parks.

In Syria, independence in 1946 marked the beginning of Syrian control over cultural heritage from the time Sehmi Abdulhak founded the current Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (al-Maqdissi 2008: 16). The

government issued a series of regulations concerning cultural heritage, notably the 1963 Antiquities Law No. 222, which remains the country's chief legal instrument for protecting antiquities and cultural heritage. This law abolished the division of excavated finds with foreign missions and required much stricter permit procedures (Prott and O'Keefe 1988: 207; UNESCO 2017). The most recent (1999) of three subsequent amendments responded to increased looting of sites.

Unlike Syria, Lebanon's independence in 1943 did not mark a shift away from French Mandate antiquities law. Instead, in subsequent decades the government of Lebanon followed the 1933 law without updated legislation (Hamadi and Azar 2010: 118). This law charges the Directorate General of Antiquities (DGA) with protecting and coordinating cultural heritage, specifically archaeology, monuments, and museums. While ministerial orders have altered some clauses of the 1933 law, it remains largely intact. In some instances, there have been changes in interpretation. The law's requirement that excavation permits be granted only to universities and institutions, rather than individuals, has been interpreted as restricting permits to foreigners (Sader 2013). Despite continued adherence and few changes to the 1933 law, several decrees concerning cultural heritage have been issued. Because many artifacts were looted or stolen during the fifteen-year civil war, for example, two decrees were passed in 1988 to protect artifacts and regulate trade in antiquities. In 2008, Law No. 37 redefined cultural property and established a formal legal process regarding its protection (UNESCO 2017; Hamadi and Azar 2010: 120). The main museum, founded in Beirut during the Mandate period, became the National Museum in 1942. The museum and the DGA were on the front lines of the civil war and suffered significant damage. The museum reopened in 1999, illustrating a successful effort to rebuild the country's cultural heritage infrastructure (Hamadi and Azar 2010: 120).

Beginning in the early 1950s, Egypt's new Republic government used cultural heritage to bolster its nationalism. As part of these efforts the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance (later the Ministry of Culture) was created in 1958. Around the same time, the colonial-era Antiquities Service became the Supreme Council for Antiquities (el Batraoui and Khafagui 2010: 57–77). Egypt's first national legislation related to cultural heritage is the 1951 Law No. 215, which focused on protecting antiquities. A revised version, the Antiquities Law of 1983, is the primary legislation there today. These laws define antiquities and cultural heritage, regulate their protection, and reaffirm that they are state property (UNESCO 2017; see also Table 26.1). Increasing privatization since the 1980s has also increased the number of private museums and cultural institutions. Over the last three decades, the income generated by foreign tourists has become a large and crucial part of the Egyptian economy. Tourism income has also funded more folklore museums and archaeological site museums, among others.

Table 26.1 Key cultural heritage domestic laws

<i>Country</i>	<i>Laws and dates</i>
Egypt	Law N. 215 On the Protection of Antiquities, 1951 Law N. 117 On the Protection of Antiquities, 1983 Law N. 3 Amendment to Law N. 117, 2010
Iran	National Heritage Protection Act, 1930 National Heritage Registration Act, 1973 Bill to Prevent Illegal Digging, 1980
Iraq	Law No. 59 Antiquities Law, 1936 Ordinance No. 40 on Excavations, 1958 Law 55 Antiquities and Heritage Law, 2002
Jordan	Antiquities Law, 1929 Antiquities Law No. 21, 1988 Modified Antiquities Law No. 23, 2004
Lebanon	Order No. 166 Regulations on Antiquities, 1933 Decision on the Export of Antiquities, 1988 Law No. 37 Regarding Cultural Property, 2008
Palestine and Israel	Ordinance No. 51 on Antiquities, 1929 Israeli Antiquities Law, 1978 Israeli Antiquities Authority Law, 1989 Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities established 1994, drafts antiquities law
Syria	Law No. 222 on Antiquities, 1963 Ordinance No. 170 on Antiquities, 1978 Law No. 1 Protecting Antiquities, 1999
Turkey	Antiquities Law, 1973 (replacing the 1951 version) Law on the Conservation of Cultural

Data from UNESCO's Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws (UNESCO 2017).

International Conventions

The domestic legislation and policies described above were all influenced by larger shifts in cultural heritage preservation at both regional and international levels. The first international legislation aimed at protecting cultural heritage addressed protection during and immediately after armed conflict. Based on that legislation, and in reaction to the destruction to heritage during and after World War II, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict and its two Protocols now serve as the ethical and legal standard for treatment of cultural heritage during war (Gerstenblith 2006). The countries mentioned in this chapter are all parties to the 1954 Hague Convention (UNESCO 2018a).

Beyond armed conflict, two multilateral international conventions have helped shape domestic laws protecting cultural heritage in the region. In 1972, UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage, also known as the World Heritage Convention. The Convention aimed to protect immovable cultural heritage sites, and linked cultural and natural resources. Its best-known provision is the World Heritage List of sites of “outstanding universal value” (UNESCO 1972). All countries discussed in this chapter are also parties to the World Heritage Convention, and have contributed in total sixty cultural sites to the World Heritage List (UNESCO 2018b).

The second major international treaty, ratified by all but one of these nine nations, is the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Also known simply as the 1970 Convention, it addresses illegally exported cultural objects and the domestic trade in cultural objects. Looting and theft of artifacts has long been recognized as a significant and especially damaging problem at cultural heritage sites (Brodie, Doole, and Renfrew 2001). Cultural heritage sites throughout the Middle East are vulnerable to thefts—a direct result of the high market value placed on its artifacts (Brodie et al. 2006)—and the market in looted antiquities and associated forgeries remains active (Muscarella 2012). In addition to the legally binding international conventions, UNESCO has developed or partnered with a number of affiliated international bodies that deal with cultural heritage issues. Those active in the Middle East include the International Council on

Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), and the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM).

Conclusion

In recent years, specific events related to the protection of cultural heritage or its absence have drawn international media attention. Examples include the 2003 looting of the Iraq National Museum in Baghdad (Emberling and Hanson 2008) and Egyptian protests to protect the Cairo Museum in 2011. The power of tangible cultural heritage in the modern world means that in addition to possession of an artifact or site conveying a political claim of ownership and dominance, the act or assertion of protection now also provides a valuable political claim. The development of modern cultural heritage laws, government services, and museums across the Middle East reflects the variety of claims and uses of cultural heritage in the service of colonialism, collectors, and nationalistic political and economic interests.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

Garrison 2012, Beaulieu 2013, and the papers collected in May 2012 examine evidence for ancient practices relating to cultural heritage, with bibliography. Recent edited volumes treating issues of cultural heritage and its twentieth-century development in the Middle East include Emberling 2010b. Periodicals and websites devoted to issues of cultural heritage include the *International Journal of Cultural Property* (1992–); the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) blog focuses on the Middle East (<http://asorblog.org>).

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NOTES

1. Cultural heritage more broadly construed includes elements of culture that may be more intangible, such as cuisine, folktales, or language itself, but these have less often been possessed, destroyed, or contested.
2. Ancient “Near East” is itself a political designation. Of course it is a geographic reference that assumes a basis in Europe. But since the term “Near East” is not in common use to describe the modern territory, it serves to separate the ancient cultures of the region from present inhabitants, reserving ancient cultures for scholarship. The phrase is retained here in deference to this volume’s conventions.
3. Medieval views of antiquity form an important connection between ancient and modern views. The subject has been inadequately researched (but for Egypt see Colla [2007](#)), and space precludes further discussion here.

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